

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

15 October 2019

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Clarke, Jan and Greenberg, Mitchell (2019) 'Sites of performance and circulation : tragedy in the repertory of Molière's troupe and its successors, 1659-1689.', in A cultural history of tragedy in the Age of Enlightenment. London: Bloomsbury. The cultural histories series., 4

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/a-cultural-history-of-tragedy-9781474288149/>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Bloomsbury Academic in A Cultural History of Tragedy in the Age of Enlightenment on 28 November 2019 available online: <http://www.bloomsbury.com/9781474288149>

### Additional information:

---

### Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

## Sites of Performance and Circulation: Tragedy in the Repertory of Molière's Troupe and its Successors, 1659-1689

### Objective and sources

The years 1659 to 1689 were important in the history and development of tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Pierre Corneille returned to writing for the stage as they were beginning,<sup>2</sup> and Racine's illustrious career began in 1664. They have, however, been much studied, and my objective here is to throw new light on the performance and reception of tragedy by examining the part it played in the programming of three companies that succeeded one another: Molière's troupe, the Hôtel Guénégaud company and the Comédie-Française. In 1659, the actor La Grange joined Molière's troupe, which had returned to Paris from the provinces the year before, and began to keep his celebrated *Registre*.<sup>3</sup> Molière had begun his career in Paris in the 1640s as a member of the Illustre Théâtre, which he founded with members of the Béjart family. When it failed, he left the capital and spent over a decade touring the provinces. Upon his return, he found three troupes operating in Paris: the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Marais companies and an Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupe performing in a theatre in the Petit-Bourbon palace. The King, Louis XIV, first ordered Molière to share the Petit-Bourbon with the Italians. Then, when that was demolished,<sup>4</sup> both troupes moved to a theatre in the Palais-Royal.

When Molière died in February 1673, his troupe lost its leader, chief playwright and principal actor. Moreover, its theatre in the Palais-Royal was immediately allocated to the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully for his operas. It must have appeared that the company would not recover, and four actors left for the relative security of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The remaining members of Molière's troupe succeeded, however, in taking over the Hôtel Guénégaud, where they were joined by actors from the Marais Theatre, whose own company was dissolved.<sup>5</sup> This new troupe performed at the Guénégaud until 1680, when the Hôtel de

---

<sup>1</sup> A fuller version of this article will appear in *The Seventeenth Century*. I am grateful to Mitchell Greenberg and Richard Maber for their generosity in allowing me to publish my work in these two locations.

<sup>2</sup> He had abandoned it following the failure of *Pertharite* in 1652.

<sup>3</sup> La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by B. E. Young and G. P. Young, 2 vols (Paris: Droz, 1947). La Grange abandoned his summary in 1685.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 25-27.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume One: Founding, Design and Production* (Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1998), 3-56.

Bourgogne was itself closed down and its actors transferred to the Guénégaud to form the Comédie-Française.<sup>6</sup>

La Grange's *Registre* is a personal summary of the 'official' account books of the three companies to which he belonged and which are the focus of our attention here, where details of plays performed, income and expenditure were recorded. All of those of Molière's troupe have been lost except for three: La Thorillière's first and second account books (1663-64, 1664-65) and that of Hubert (1672-73).<sup>7</sup> The full set of Guénégaud account books is preserved in the archives of the Comédie-Française; they have never been reproduced in full, but I have analysed them and published a summary.<sup>8</sup> The Comédie-Française also holds its own account books from 1680 onwards, and many have recently been made available online as part of the Comédie-Française Registers Project.<sup>9</sup> The account books of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Marais companies have, however, disappeared, as have those of the Comédie-Italienne prior to its reestablishment in 1716. This is frustrating, since the Hôtel de Bourgogne was known as the home of tragedy. Scholars have, however, done much to establish the company's repertoire,<sup>10</sup> although obviously without the detail we have for Molière's troupe, the Guénégaud company and the Comédie-Française.

### Genre and specialisation

If the Hôtel de Bourgogne was known for tragedy, the Marais specialised in spectacular works known as machine plays, while the Italians offered improvised *commedia dell'arte* and Molière contributed comedy, farce and, eventually, *comédie-ballet*. Machine plays and *comédie-ballet* (and indeed opera) were means by which companies sought to exploit the public's passion for spectacle. Many spectacular works were on tragic subjects and are described as *tragédie en*

---

<sup>6</sup> Jan Clarke, 'Part 3: 1680-1715', in *French Theatre in the Neo-Classical Era*, ed. by William D. Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 285-90.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Monval, *Le Premier Registre de La Thorillière (1663-1664)*, (Geneva: Slatkine, 1969); William Leonard Schwartz, 'Light on Molière in 1664 from *Le Second Registre de La Thorillière*', *PMLA*, 53 (1938): 1054-1075; Sylvie Chevalley, 'Le "Registre d'Hubert", 1672-1673', *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 25 (1973): 1-132.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume Two: the Accounts Season by Season* (Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> <http://cfregisters.org/en/> (accessed 1 June 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century*, 9 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1929-1942); S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne*, 2 vols (Paris: Nizet, 1968-70). On the meaning of *répertoire* in French, see Christian Biet, 'Introduction: la question du répertoire au théâtre', *Littératures classiques*, 95 (2018): 7-14: 7-8; and Agathe Sanjuan, 'Lecture du répertoire dans les archives de la Comédie-Française', *Littératures classiques*, 95 (2018): 45-54: 45. In English, *repertory* is sometimes used as a synonym for *repertoire*, but primarily refers to the performance of works in rotation and is used as a modifier ('repertory company', 'repertory actor'). Throughout this article, *repertoire* refers to the catalogue of plays that can be performed by a given troupe.

*machines, tragédie-ballet* or *tragédie lyrique*. Inevitably, companies competed for a limited audience and,<sup>11</sup> while each troupe had its specialisation, they all gave works across a range of genres and sought to emulate each other's successes, particularly where these involved music and spectacle. However, from 1672 onwards, Lully had a monopoly on stage music that was protected by the imposition of limits on the numbers of singers and musicians other companies could employ.<sup>12</sup> The troupes, though, also competed with regard to tragedy, as we will see.

### **Rhythm of performances**

Theatrical seasons ran from Easter to Easter with a pause of approximately three weeks in between. Companies did not perform every day; the most favoured days were the 'ordinary' days (Tuesday, Friday, Sunday), with the remainder being known as the 'extraordinary' days.<sup>13</sup> Chappuzeau in his *Théâtre français* of 1674 boasts of the number of 'spectacles' available to the theatre-going public, which added up to more than 800 per year.<sup>14</sup> This seems few, though, in comparison with modern norms, and Molière's troupe never performed more than fourteen times in a month and frequently less or not at all, when called upon to entertain the King.<sup>15</sup>

At the Petit-Bourbon, Molière's troupe performed on the 'extraordinary' days, switching to the 'ordinary' days when the two troupes transferred to the Palais-Royal. When actors from Molière's troupe and the Marais came together at the Guénégaud, the Italians went with them, still performing on the 'extraordinary days'. However, when they were abroad or at court, the French performed every day, which became the norm at the Comédie-Française. This was possible primarily because the Italians had been sent (reluctantly) to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, but was also facilitated by the large size of the new company, which was able to perform simultaneously at court and in town, thereby eliminating the enforced breaks endured by Molière's troupe.

---

<sup>11</sup> John Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

<sup>12</sup> Jan Clarke, 'Music at the Guénégaud Theatre, 1673-1680', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 12 (1990): 89-110.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre français* (1674), ed. by Christopher J. Gossip (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2009), 104-05.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-05.

<sup>15</sup> Jan Clarke, 'Les Conséquences pour la troupe de Molière de ses voyages à la cour, 1667-1672', in *Molière à la cour: les Amants magnifiques en 1670*, ed. by Laura Naudeix, forthcoming.

## Theatre design and social stratification

The dominant model in seventeenth-century French theatre design was the real tennis court or *jeu de paume*.<sup>16</sup> From the 1630s onwards, companies occupied these buildings by means of installations ranging from the temporary to the more-or-less permanent. The form was so fixed in the collective psyche that when companies moved into buildings that were not tennis courts, such as the Petit-Bourbon or the Palais-Royal, they constructed what were effectively tennis courts within them. Yet tennis courts did not make good theatres; they were long and thin and people in the boxes had a better view of the public opposite than they did of the stage.<sup>17</sup> This was installed at one end of the rectangle with two rows of boxes with a gallery above around the remaining three sides. The centre was left empty to form the *parterre* or standing area, which was exclusively the domain of male spectators, and a stepped area of seating known as the *amphithéâtre* occupied the far end, above or below the rear boxes. Privileged male spectators could occupy seats on the stage;<sup>18</sup> women were limited to the two rows of boxes and the gallery above.<sup>19</sup> There was also pronounced social stratification, with the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie occupying the lower boxes and the seats on stage, while the third-row gallery was reserved primarily for servants.<sup>20</sup> The *parterre*, on the other hand, was socially mixed. It is often stated that the upper classes preferred tragedy,<sup>21</sup> and it might appear possible to test this by comparing sales for tragedy in the different areas of the house with those for other genres. There are, though, complicating factors, as we will see.

## Programming – general considerations

Companies gave either one or two plays in an evening. The main play would usually be a comedy, *comédie-ballet*, or tragedy, while the second play, sometimes referred to as a ‘petite pièce’, would generally be either a comedy or a farce. Tragedies are, though, occasionally found in second position and, on two occasions, two tragedies were performed together.<sup>22</sup> Certain

---

<sup>16</sup> See William L. Wiley, *The Early Public Theatre in France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>17</sup> Jan Clarke, 'Le Spectateur au Palais Royal et à l'Hôtel Guénégaud', in *Le Spectateur de théâtre à l'Âge Classique: XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, ed. by Bénédicte Louvat-Molozay and Franck Salaün (Montpellier: L'Entretemps, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Barbara G. Mittman, *Spectators on the Paris Stage in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor MI: UMI Research Press, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> Boyer's tragedy *Judith* was so successful in 1695 that women occupied seats on stage for the first time, much to the amusement of the men in the audience (Clarke, 'Part 3: 1680-1715', 371).

<sup>20</sup> Clarke, *Guénégaud I*, 248.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Descotes, *Le Public de théâtre et son histoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 130.

<sup>22</sup> Tristan's *Mariane* was given three times in second position in 1666-67, following Molière's *Misanthrope* (once) and Pierre Corneille's *Sertorius* (twice) (Jan Clarke, 'Tristan dans les registres', *Cahiers Tristan l'Hermite*, 37 (2015): 23-45: 28).

comedies by Molière, on the other hand, are found in both first and second position, sometimes during a single season.<sup>23</sup>

When new plays were introduced, they were usually given a run of continuous performances, and the length of this is one indicator of a play's success. Either the first play or the second could constitute the main attraction. When a main play was new, it was generally given alone during its first run, but might then be bolstered by the addition of old 'petites pièces'. Or when a new second play was given, it would be with series of 'stock' main plays. This use of double bills, where either play could constitute the main draw, renders almost impossible any analysis of ticket sales by genre. For example, how can we know that when 205 people sat on the stage and in the first-row boxes at the opening night of the Comédie-Française in 1680, they were there to see Racine's *Phèdre* rather than Champmeslé's *Carrosses d'Orléans*, which had been created at the Guénégaud just two weeks before?<sup>24</sup>

For roughly half our period, ticket prices for the cheaper seats were raised during the first run of new main plays (but not of new 'petites pièces'), while prices for the more expensive areas (stage, first-row boxes, *amphithéâtre*) remained unchanged. These were known as performances 'au double'. From late 1676 onwards, prices for these expensive seats were lowered for regular performances, so that the public in them was also affected by the 'double'. The financial impact would, though, obviously have been less for them than for people in the cheaper areas. Indeed, the 'double' seems to have been specifically designed to benefit more wealthy members of the audience by enabling them to see new works as a privileged elite.

Another factor affecting programme composition was the season, and Chappuzeau recounts how new plays were generally performed between All Saints Day and Easter, with 'heroic plays' being preferred in winter and comedies in summer.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, he defines *répertoire* as 'a list of old plays to sustain the theatre during the heat of summer and the outings of autumn, so as not to be forced on the evening of every performance to decide in haste and tumult which play to announce'.<sup>26</sup> This is, though, a simplification, since old plays were performed all year round. Indeed, across our period, on average eighty-six per cent of plays performed in any given season were old.<sup>27</sup> It is, though, the case that only four tragedies were created between April and October, and for all but one of these there are obvious factors

<sup>23</sup> Jan Clarke, 'Molière's Double Bills', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 20 (1998): 29-44.

<sup>24</sup> See also Sophie Marchand, 'Réflexions sur le succès théâtral à partir des nouvelles perspectives ouvertes par la base de données des registres de la Comédie-Française', *Littératures classiques*, 95 (2018): 67-76: 69.

<sup>25</sup> Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre français*, ed. by Gossip, 104.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>27</sup> The proportion of old plays only dropped below 75% in 1667-68 (59%).

determining the choice of date.<sup>28</sup> Warfare was also a seasonal occupation and one reason for preferring winter to summer for new tragedies was that male members of the *noblesse d'épée* would have been away on campaign during the summer months, while other members of the aristocracy would have retired to their country estates. A company's repertoire of stock plays constituted, therefore, an important resource, and it aimed to select new plays that would be popular enough to enter the repertoire, thereby allowing it to capitalise on its initial investment. These new plays were usually only published once their initial run had ceased and, by custom, remained the property of the troupe that had produced them and were not performed by any other company during that time.

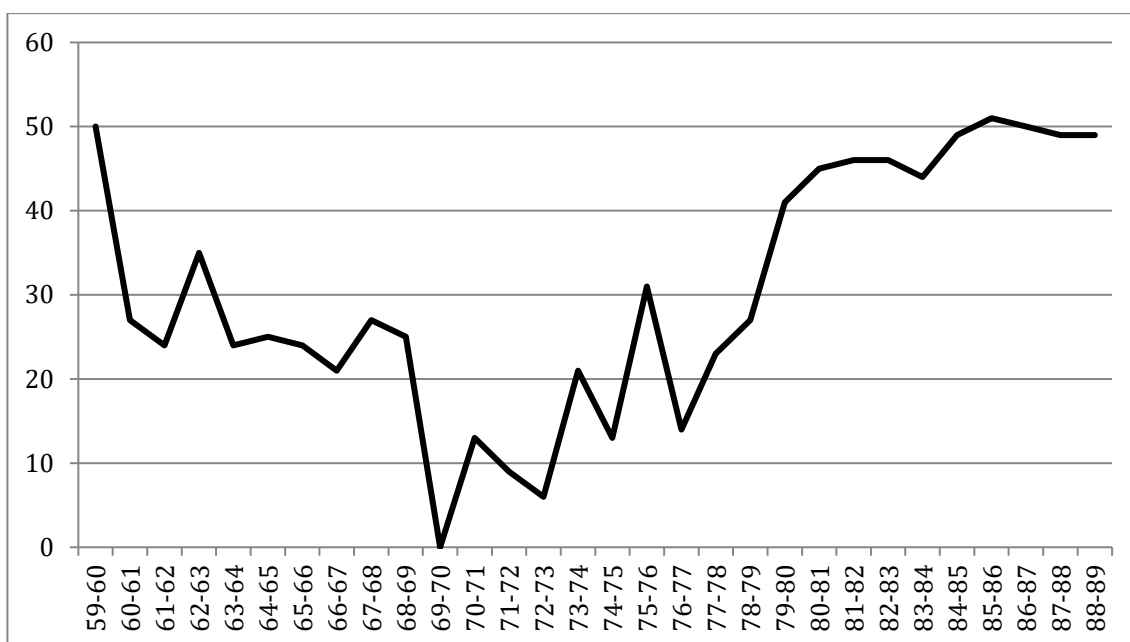
The total number of plays given per season varied hugely across our period, with the lowest figure being twelve in 1669-70 and the highest 105 in 1686-87.<sup>29</sup> On average, four new plays were created per season by Molière's troupe, falling to three at the Guénégaud, then rising to ten at the Comédie-Française, with the highest figure being thirteen in 1685-86. In only comparatively few seasons were no new tragedies given (1661-62, 1663-64, 1667-68, 1668-69, 1672-73), all of which were during the 'Molière' phase. Thereafter, one or two new tragedies were given each season at the Guénégaud, and between two and five per season at the Comédie-Française.

When Molière's troupe returned to the capital, the numbers of tragedies and main plays in other genres in his company's repertoire were roughly equal, but as he came to specialise in his own works the proportion of tragedies fell. Indeed, his company performed no tragedies at all in 1669-70 and only one new tragedy (*Psyché*) in 1671-72. This same low level continued during the early years at the Guénégaud, but rose rapidly towards the end of this phase for reasons we will discuss. Following the creation of the Comédie-Française, not only did the size of the repertoire increase exponentially, but so did the number of tragedies it contained. This is, though, hardly surprising, given that it now included the stock plays from the repertoire of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. These fluctuations appear most clearly when percentages are used to indicate the relation between tragedies and main plays in other genres (Figure 1), or the number of performances involving a tragedy (Figure 2).

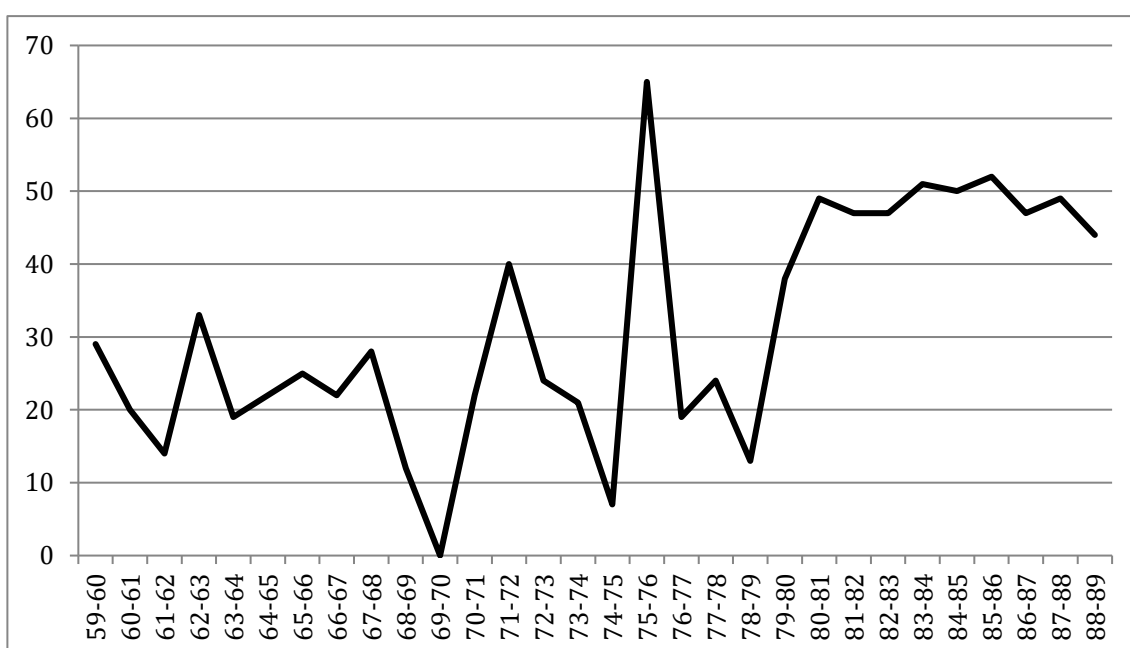
### **Figure 1: Percentage of 'main plays' that were tragedies**

<sup>28</sup> See below for Racine's *Thébaïde*, *Psyché* by Molière, Pierre Corneille and Quinault, and *Circé* by Donneau De Visé and Thomas Corneille. The only play whose summer creation I can not explain is Louvart's *Mort d'Alexandre*

<sup>29</sup> Figures relate solely to public performances in Paris. Court and other private performances will be examined briefly later. Free public performances (for example to celebrate a royal birth) are also omitted.



**Figure 2: Percentage of performances that involved tragedies**



The two peaks that appear in the second chart in particular relate to the productions of *Psyché* and *Circé* (see below). The increased presence of tragedy in terms of both repertoire and performances from 1679-80 onwards is similarly striking. Tragedy may only have equalled or exceeded main plays in other genres in two seasons for repertoire (1659-60, 1685-86) and three for performances (1675-76, 1683-84 and 1685-86), but it was significantly more prevalent at the Comédie-Française, where roughly half of all performances involved a tragedy, than it had been at either Palais-Royal or Guénégaud. This, then, nuances Sara Harvey's view that 'from



1684-1685 onwards, comedy was on the rise from all points of view and this tendency was maintained up to the end of the century'.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, in 1712, the King, 'having been informed that the actors are performing as few tragedies as possible', ordered them 'to perform alternately a serious play and a comic one',<sup>31</sup> thereby advocating a return to the practice of thirty years before.

Stock plays were each given very few performances per season: frequently between three and five and sometimes only one. At first glance, this seems a colossal waste of effort – why bother to keep a play in the repertoire but only perform it once or twice a year? It also represents a remarkable feat of memory. During its last few seasons, the Guénégaud company regularly performed over fifty plays, and more than double that number became the norm at the Comédie-Française. This practice of giving very few performances of a large number of plays may, in fact, have been introduced specifically to aid their retention in the repertoire – enabling actors to refresh their memories by means of an occasional outing.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, it is extraordinary that the public would have had only one or two opportunities per season to see a much-loved elderly play. This might suggest that, with the exception of novelties, the public did not care what it saw, which De Visé explicitly states in his *Nouvelles nouvelles* when writing about the high proportion of old plays in the repertoire of Molière's troupe when newly returned to Paris: 'people came through habit, without intending to listen to the play and without knowing what was being performed'.<sup>33</sup> This returns us, though, to our initial question: if people did not care what they saw, why did troupes keep so many plays in their repertoires?

### Molière's troupe

As we have seen, Molière returned to Paris with a roughly equal number of tragedies and comedies in his baggage, and his troupe continued to perform a small number of tragedies both old and new in all seasons but 1669-70. Many of the former were by Pierre Corneille: *Héraclius*, *Rodogune*, *Cinna*, *La Mort de Pompée*, *Le Cid*, and *Horace* were all given in 1559-60, and *Nicomède* and *Sertorius* were added in later seasons<sup>34</sup>. Molière had frequented the Corneille

---

<sup>30</sup> Sara Harvey, 'La Genèse stratifiée du répertoire de la Comédie-Française entre 1680 et 1730', *Littératures classiques* (2018): 89-103: 94.

<sup>31</sup> Jules Bonnassies, *La Comédie-Française: histoire administrative (1658-1757)* (Paris: Didier, 1874), 134.

<sup>32</sup> Jan Clarke, 'La Création d'un répertoire national: la Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1689', *Littératures classiques*, 95 (2018): 77-88: 88.

<sup>33</sup> Naissance de la critique dramatique, <https://www2.unil.ch/ncd17/index.php?extractCode=1043> (accessed 13 June 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Jan Clarke, 'Pierre Corneille dans les répertoires des troupes de Molière et de l'Hôtel Guénégaud', *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 106 (2006): 571-598.

brothers in Rouen immediately before returning to the capital,<sup>35</sup> and according to Georges Couton, wanted to become a Pierre Corneille specialist.<sup>36</sup> He performed *Nicomède* for the King at his Paris 'try out', but his success there was more thanks to the farce that followed, which may be why it was not given in public until the following season.<sup>37</sup> Corneille returned to writing for the stage in 1659, but gave his new works elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Molière continued to perform the old ones he had in his repertoire. Other old tragedies performed by Molière's troupe during its first Paris seasons were *Mariane* and *La Mort de Crispe* by Tristan l'Hermite, *Scévole* and *Alcionée* by Du Ryer, and *Venceslas* by Rotrou. Certain of these works had probably previously been performed by the Illustre Théâtre in the 1640s, notably *Cinna*, *La Mort de Pompée*, *Horace*, *Le Cid*, *Scévole*, *Mariane*, and *La Mort de Crispe*.<sup>39</sup>



Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known as Molière by Nicolas Mignard  
 Portrait of the French actor and playwright Jean Baptiste Poquelin, known by his stage name Molière (1622-1673), as 'Julius Cesar' in the play 'La mort de Pompee' by Corneille. Painting by Nicolas Mignard (1606-1668), ca.1657. 0,75 x 0,6 m. Comedie francaise, Paris (Photo by Leemage/Corbis via Getty Images)

<sup>35</sup> F. Boquet, *La Troupe de Molière et les deux Corneille à Rouen en 1658* (Paris: A. Claudin, 1858).

<sup>36</sup> Molière, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), I, xxvii.

<sup>37</sup> Molière, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Forestier and Claude Bourqui, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), I, 1101

<sup>38</sup> *Oedipe* (1659), *Sophonisbe* (1663), *Othon* (1664), and *Agésilas* (1666) to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and *La Conquête de la Toison d'or* (1661) and *Sertorius* (1662) to the Marais.

<sup>39</sup> Hugh Gaston Hall, 'Le Répertoire de l'Illustre Théâtre des Béjart et de Molière', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 30 (1993): 276-291. Hall points out that a portrait of Molière by Mignard shows him in the role of Pompée.

According to legend, Molière went on stage to follow his lover, Madeleine Béjart. She was a great tragic actress and a number of commentators have attributed the continuing presence of tragedy in the repertoire of Molière's troupe to her influence, sometimes in a somewhat misogynistic way. C. E. J. Caldicott, for example, claims that Molière's acting style and repertoire were determined by Madeleine and that his obligation to her threatened to divert him from his true vocation.<sup>40</sup> Virginia Scott, on the other hand, while agreeing that Madeleine's preference for tragedy may have been a factor, believes Molière shared the prevailing view as to the superiority of that genre. She also quotes lines from Le Boulanger de Chalussay's satire *Élomire hypocondre*,<sup>41</sup> describing how the public was dissatisfied with Molière's productions of *Héraclius*, *Rodogune*, *Cinna*, *Le Cid* and *Pompée*, but considered his *Étourdi* a marvel.<sup>42</sup> This is, though, a comic simplification and Molière's troupe continued to perform tragedies (including those of Corneille) throughout the greater part of its Paris career, although they were performed less as Molière's own works came to dominate the repertoire.

Another legend has Molière despising comedy and writing his 'heroic comedy' *Dom Garcie de Navarre* (1661) as the 'next best thing'.<sup>43</sup> The outcome was disappointing, causing De Visé to comment in his *Nouvelles nouvelles* (1663) that it was not entertaining because it was a serious play and Molière had the lead role. He also attempts to explain both Molière's persistence and his success: 'the esteem in which he was beginning to be held meant that people put up with him'.<sup>44</sup> This view of the incapacity of Molière and his troupe in tragedy was widely held,<sup>45</sup> and he soon gave up performing in the genre himself.<sup>46</sup> Molière is known, of course, for having advocated a more 'natural' acting style, which according to Sabine Chaouche was considered lacking in nobility and, therefore, unsuitable for tragedy.<sup>47</sup>

Molière was not, though, prepared to give the genre up. His troupe created two new tragedies in 1659-60: *Pylade et Oreste* by Coqueteau de la Clairière, given just three

---

<sup>40</sup> C. E. J. Caldicott, *La Carrière de Molière entre protecteurs et éditeurs* (Amsterdam-Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1998), 31.

<sup>41</sup> Virginia Scott, *Molière: a Theatrical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93; and Virginia Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France 1540-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 150-55.

<sup>42</sup> Molière's *L'Étourdi* was first performed in Paris in November 1658.

<sup>43</sup> Molière, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, I, 340.

<sup>44</sup> Naissance de la critique dramatique, <https://www2.unil.ch/ncd17/index.php?extractCode=1043> (accessed 10 September 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Constant Venesoen, 'Molière tragédien', *XVIIe Siècle* (1969): 25-34.

<sup>46</sup> He is not named among the cast members for Racine's *Alexandre* in 1665 (Georges Forestier, *Jean Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 237).

<sup>47</sup> Sabine Chaouche, *L'Art du comédien: déclamation et jeu scénique en France à l'âge classique (1629-1680)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2013), 298.

performances, and *Zénobie*, by Magnon, a previous supplier of the Illustre Théâtre, which did slightly better with seven. Both subsequently disappeared from the repertoire. In comparison, Molière's first new Parisian 'petite pièce', *Les Précieuses ridicules*, was given thirty-three times that same season.<sup>48</sup> This conjunction was not lost on his contemporaries, and Thomas Corneille wrote to the abbé de Pure deploring the failure of Coqueteau's tragedy: 'Everyone says they performed his play detestably; and the large number they had at their farce of the *Précieuses*, after having taken it off, shows clearly that they are only fit to sustain such trifles and that the strongest play would fail between their hands.'<sup>49</sup>

In 1660-61, Molière revived an example from a more recent phase of his provincial activity. Gilbert's *Amours de Diane et d'Endimion*, created at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1657, had been performed by Molière's troupe in Rouen in 1658.<sup>50</sup> *Endimion* is a spectacle tragedy – a genre with which Molière's troupe and those that followed were to enjoy considerable success. It was performed eleven times then disappeared, but re-emerged at the Comédie-Française some twenty years later (1681-82), which might suggest it had remained in the repertoire of the Hôtel de Bourgogne throughout that time. The single new tragedy performed by Molière's company in 1660-61 was *Le Tyran d'Égypte*, also by Gilbert,<sup>51</sup> given eight performances plus four the following season. No new tragedies were given in 1661-62 (the season that saw the creation of *L'École des maris* and *Les Fâcheux*), but in 1662-63, Boyer's *Oropaste ou le faux Tonaxare* received a highly satisfactory fifteen performances, whereas De Prade's *Arsace roi des Parthes*, was given only six.

A more significant event this season was the addition to the repertoire of Pierre Corneille's *Sertorius*. This had been created at the Marais to great acclaim in February 1662, and Molière's troupe rushed to perform it, just as it had done for *Endimion*. As we have seen, works customarily belonged to the troupe that had created them until they were published. But Molière's troupe got in a little early, giving *Sertorius* for the first time on 29 June, over a week before its publication. Mlle Des Oeillets, who had created the female lead at the Marais, moved

---

<sup>48</sup> According to John Lough, ten to fifteen performances represented a modest success, fifteen to twenty-two or three a striking success, while figures in the thirties and forties were exceptional (Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences*, 52).

<sup>49</sup> Naissance de la critique dramatique, <https://www2.unil.ch/ncd17/index.php?extractCode=1335> (accessed 13 June 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Corneille dedicated a madrigal to 'a lady who played Night in the play *Endymion*', usually supposed to have been Mlle Du Parc (Pierre Corneille, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1980-87), III, 102).

<sup>51</sup> La Grange does not identify the author of this play. However, Roger Duchêne attributes it to Gilbert and describes it as a tragedy (Roger Duchêne, *Molière* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 269).

to the Hôtel de Bourgogne at Easter 1662 and *Sertorius* went with her, meaning it was simultaneously in the repertoires of all three competing French companies.<sup>52</sup>

No new tragedies were given by Molière's troupe in 1663-64. The following season saw, though, the arrival of a fresh new talent with the creation by Molière's troupe of Racine's *Thébaïde*, which, according to Georges Forestier, had originally been intended for the Hôtel de Bourgogne.<sup>53</sup> Its summer creation (20 June 1664) was due to Molière's need of a new play following the banning of *Tartuffe*, and Racine's impatience at having to wait for a winter slot at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.<sup>54</sup> The results were not outstanding – sixteen performances in 1663-64 plus four in 1665-66.

The Hôtel de Bourgogne got its revenge the following season. On 4 December 1665, Molière's troupe gave the premiere of Racine's *Alexandre*,<sup>55</sup> and public reaction was initially good. However, ten days later, the Hôtel de Bourgogne gave a private performance of Racine's tragedy at a private festivity for the King and added it to its own repertoire shortly afterwards, causing the takings at the Palais-Royal to drop off disastrously.<sup>56</sup> The troupe's reaction is described by La Grange:

That same day the troupe was surprised when the same play *Alexandre* was performed on the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne [and] as the thing was done with the connivence of M. Racine who behaved so badly as to have given the play to the actors and had them learn it[,] the author's shares were divided and each actor had for his [or her] share 47 livres.<sup>57</sup>

This perfidious behaviour is usually attributed to Racine's dismay at the lack of ability displayed by Molière's actors. More recently, Georges Forestier has attributed it to a royal command.<sup>58</sup> Whatever the case, Molière and his troupe were outraged and no works by Racine were performed at the Palais-Royal during the remainder of Molière's lifetime. We must not, though, forget that Molière had done something similar with regard to *Sertorius* only a short time before.

---

<sup>52</sup> Clarke, 'Pierre Corneille dans les répertoires': 582-83.

<sup>53</sup> Forestier, *Jean Racine*, 191-99. Roger Duchêne (Duchêne, *Molière*, p. 344) claims that Racine's play was programmed to compete with a work by Boyer at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which argument is convincingly countered by Forestier. The two troupes did, though, compete this season with two comedies entitled *La Mère coquette*: by Quinault at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and De Visé at the Palais-Royal (ibid., 443-44).

<sup>54</sup> Forestier, *Jean Racine*, 199.

<sup>55</sup> This work must not be confused with Louvart's *Mort d'Alexandre*, performed at the Comédie-Française in 1684-85.

<sup>56</sup> Forestier, *Jean Racine*, 237-38.

<sup>57</sup> La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by Young and Young, I, 81. Authors of new main plays were generally remunerated by means of two shares in the takings during the play's first run.

<sup>58</sup> Forestier, *Jean Racine*, 241-45.

Molière scored a significant retaliatory blow in 1666-67 when he finally succeeded in obtaining a new play by Pierre Corneille – *Attila*. Corneille's star was, though, on the wane, and his previous tragedy, *Agésilas*, had flopped at the Hôtel de Bourgogne the year before.<sup>59</sup> Unusually, Molière bought the play from Corneille for a fixed price of 2,000 *livres*.<sup>60</sup> According to Chappuzeau, the actors employed this method when they were not certain a play would be a success.<sup>61</sup> However, Forestier believes it was Corneille and not Molière who was taking care to ensure a definite return.<sup>62</sup> The initial reaction was favourable and Subligny wrote that the actors performed:

With all the strength and skill  
Of which we previously thought capable  
Only the inimitable Hôtel.  
People are wrong to say everywhere  
That serious acting is not their thing.<sup>63</sup>

Couton describes *Attila* as a failure, since it was given only eleven times in its first season.<sup>64</sup> Its first run was, though, interrupted by the Easter break and, taking the two halves together, gives a respectable figure of twenty. 1667-78 also saw the creation of a new tragedy, *Cléopâtre*, by one of the troupe's own members, La Thorillière,<sup>65</sup> which was given eleven times. Chappuzeau comments on the desirability for a company of having such 'actor playwrights' among its ranks, since professional dramatists had a tendency to be high handed.<sup>66</sup> Molière's troupe was, of course, led by the greatest 'actor playwright' of the age for comedy, but must have longed to be similarly independent in tragedy.

No tragedies whatsoever were performed by Molière's troupe in 1669-70. However, in 1670-71, he offered a second tragedy by Pierre Corneille: *Tite et Bérénice*, with Mlle Molière as the heroine, again paying an advance sum of 2,000 *livres*.<sup>67</sup> This was created on 28 November 1670, just a week after the Hôtel de Bourgogne had opened Racine's tragedy on the same

---

<sup>59</sup> Duchêne, *Molière*, 479. This is the work of which Boileau famously wrote, 'I saw *Agésilas*. / Alas!'.

<sup>60</sup> La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by Young and Young, I, 88.

<sup>61</sup> Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre français*, ed. by Gossip, 102.

<sup>62</sup> Forestier, *Jean Racine*, 251.

<sup>63</sup> Corneille, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, III, 1533.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> This work must not be confused with a tragedy with the same title by La Chappelle, given at the Comédie-Française in 1681-82.

<sup>66</sup> Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre français*, ed. by Gossip, 98.

<sup>67</sup> La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by Young and Young, I, 118.

subject.<sup>68</sup> Roger Duchêne describes this as an aggressive act on Molière's part, claiming he waited for the Hôtel to announce its play before bringing out his own. Duchêne is forced to admit that, though, contemporaries did not mention competition,<sup>69</sup> and Forestier's account of an accidental opposition, unlikely as it might seem, appears correct.<sup>70</sup>

As Forestier puts it, 'someone had to lose', and this was undoubtedly Corneille (and Molière).<sup>71</sup> The appearance of the Hôtel de Bourgogne's new star, Mlle Champmeslé, as Racine's tragic heroine obviously played a part,<sup>72</sup> but it did not help that Corneille's play was performed in weekly rotation with Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme*. Again, Couton presents this as a serious failure,<sup>73</sup> but *Tite et Bérénice* was given twenty-one times during the season. Corneille, however, was not content, writing ironically in 1676 with regard to an unexpected return to favour, that 'finally *Bérénice* will find actors'.<sup>74</sup> This is, though, as Sylvie Chevalley has pointed out, manifestly unfair,<sup>75</sup> and Armande Béjart followed her sister in sustaining a number of tragic roles in the repertoire, and was still appearing as Andromaque and Mariane in 1685.<sup>76</sup>

The following season, 1671-72, saw the creation of the most successful tragic play of this phase: *Psyché*. It is described on its title page as a 'tragédie ballet' and, like *Endimion*, featured considerable spectacular content. *Psyché* was a collaborative effort: Pierre Corneille assisted Molière with the versification, while Quinault provided lyrics for the songs. First performed for Louis in the Salle des machines in the Tuileries Palace,<sup>77</sup> Molière had to renovate his Palais-Royal theatre to give it in public.<sup>78</sup> The investment paid off, and *Psyché* was given an astonishing fifty-one performances in 1671-72, plus thirty-one more the following season.

---

<sup>68</sup> These plays are both referred to in the account books as 'Bérénice'. To avoid confusion, I have used *Tite et Bérénice* for Corneille's tragedy and the shorter form for Racine's work.

<sup>69</sup> Duchêne, *Molière*, 591-92.

<sup>70</sup> Forestier, *Jean Racine*, 384-87.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>72</sup> Mlle Champmeslé had joined the Hôtel de Bourgogne from the Marais in 1670 (Georges Mongrédien and Jean Robert, *Les Comédiens français du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: dictionnaire biographique* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981), 53).

<sup>73</sup> Corneille, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, III, 1606.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 1312.

<sup>75</sup> Sylvie Chevalley, 'Les deux *Bérénice*', *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 22 (1970): 91-124.

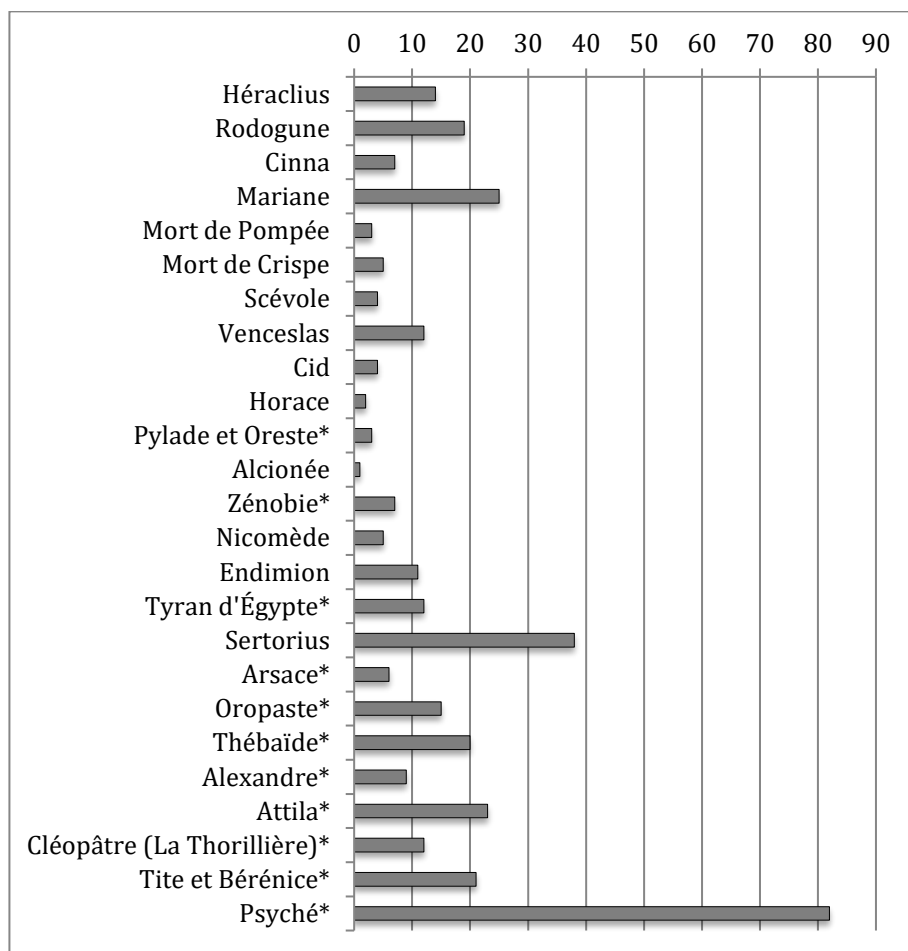
<sup>76</sup> Henry Carrington Lancaster, *Actors' Roles at the Comédie Française according to the Répertoire des comédies françaises qui se peuvent jouer en 1685* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1953), 5, 19

<sup>77</sup> Molière, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Forestier and Bourqui, II, 1483.

<sup>78</sup> La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by Young and Young, I, 124-26.

The following chart shows the number of performances per play for those tragedies given by Molière's troupe between 1659 and 1673. The plays are shown in performance order and premieres are indicated by an asterisk.

**Figure 3: Total number of performances of individual tragedies given by Molière's troupe, 1659-60 to 1672-73**



We see that *Psyché* was by far the most successful (eighty-two performances), followed by *Sertorius* on thirty-eight, and with *Mariane*, *La Thébaïde*, *Attila*, and *Tite et Bérénice* all achieving figures in the twenties.

### Hôtel Guénégaud

The Guénégaud company was formed in 1673 by the union of actors from Molière's troupe with others from the Marais, but Molière's former actors had the upper hand and their repertoire



dominated.<sup>79</sup> The Marais actors had, though, one fairly recent tragedy that the new troupe was able to perform: Boursault's *Amours de Germanicus* (1672), which was given nine times in 1673-74 and twice in 1676-77, before re-emerging in another form. It also gave Montfleury's *Ambigu comique*, created at the Marais just before its closure. This strange play consists of a three-act tragedy on the subject of Dido, plus three 'petites pièces' that serve as prologue and *intermèdes* and were sometimes performed separately.<sup>80</sup> *L'Ambigu comique* became a staple of the Guénégaud repertoire, being given between one and five performances during every season between 1673-74 and 1678-79.<sup>81</sup>

The Guénégaud company gave a single new tragedy during its first season: *La Mort d'Achilles* by Thomas Corneille, which received nine performances before disappearing. This was a more significant event than this meagre tally would suggest. As we have seen, Thomas had been hostile to Molière, writing that his troupe was fit only to perform 'trifles'. The animosity was returned, with Molière satirising the playwright (known as M. de l'Isle) in act I, scene 1 of *L'École des femmes*. However, following Molière's death, Thomas became, in effect, the Guénégaud's 'house playwright' and, working in collaboration with De Visé, provided some of its greatest successes.

Indeed, in 1675-76, Thomas and De Visé furnished the Guénégaud with its greatest triumph in the form of *Circé* – described on the title page as a 'tragedy decorated with machines, scene changes and music'.<sup>82</sup> As such, *Circé* not only followed on from *Psyché*, but also capitalised on the expertise of the former members of the Marais team, who had enjoyed considerable success with machine plays by Pierre Corneille, Boyer and De Visé.<sup>83</sup> The creation of *Circé* did not, though, proceed without incident: some members of the troupe opposed its production and were first excluded from the company then reintegrated, and preparations were long and costly.<sup>84</sup> As a result, it was only possible to give *Circé* nine times before Easter. However, as with *Attila*, performances continued after the break, and it was given a further

---

<sup>79</sup> Jan Clarke, 'Repertory and Revival at the Guénégaud Theatre, 1673-1680', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 10 (1988): 136-53; Jan Clarke, 'Another look at the Comédie-Française as the "Maison de Molière"', *Nottingham French Studies*, 33 (1994): 71-82: 78-79.

<sup>80</sup> The Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française of 1694 defines *ambigu* as a 'meal where meat and fruit are served at the same time' (<https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/publicdicos/query?report=bibliography&head=ambigu>) (accessed 31 July 2018).

<sup>81</sup> The Guénégaud also gave performances of Pierre Corneille's 'heroic comedy' *Pulchérie*, created at the Marais in 1672: four in 1673-74 and two in 1675-76, 1676-77 and 1677-78.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Corneille, *Circé*, ed. by Jan Clarke (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1989), ii.

<sup>83</sup> Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume Three: the Demise of the Machine Play* (Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2007), 65-92.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-34.

sixty-eight times in 1676-77. Curiously, while other machine plays were revived at the Comédie-Française in the period we are considering, *Circé* was not among them and it had to wait until 1705, when Dancourt provided a new prologue and *divertissements*.

There may have been doubts as to the intentionality of the opposition of the two *Bérénices*, but 1675-76 saw the start of what Guy Boquet describes as the 'war of the tragedies',<sup>85</sup> whereby the Guénégaud gave plays specifically designed to oppose Hôtel de Bourgogne productions. During this season, it gave *Iphigénie* by Le Clerc and Coras, originally planned to compete with Racine's play, although ultimately there was no direct opposition; it received just seven performances. Pradon's *Phèdre et Hippolyte* of 1676-77 was more successful in opposition to Racine's *Phèdre*, with nineteen performances.<sup>86</sup> Racine did not take kindly to these attempts to undercut him; he delayed the production of the rival *Iphigénie* and attempted but failed to do the same for *Phèdre et Hippolyte*.<sup>87</sup> According to Pradon's preface, he even dissuaded the Guénégaud's leading actresses from taking on the main female role, which was ultimately played by the relatively unknown Mlle Guyot.<sup>88</sup> Racine retired from writing for the professional stage in 1677, but the 'war' continued. In 1677-78, the Guénégaud company set Boyer's *Comte d'Essex* up against a tragedy of the same name by its own purveyor of spectacular entertainment, Thomas Corneille; it received just eight performances.

Other new tragedies performed between 1675-76 and 1678-79 were Abeille's *Coriolan*, given eighteen performances in 1675-76;<sup>89</sup> Pradon's *Électre*, given just eight times in 1677-78; and Boursault's *Princesse de Clèves*, which, according to its author, was a reworking of *Germanicus*, designed to capitalise on the success of Mme de Lafayette's novel,<sup>90</sup> but which was withdrawn after just two performances in 1678-79. Of these, only *Coriolan* and *Phèdre et Hippolyte* can be deemed to have been successes. At the same time, the company sought to increase its performance of tragedy more generally through the revival of old works, sometimes after a considerable interval: Tristan's *Mariane* (ten seasons), Du Ryer's *Scévole* (eighteen seasons), *Tite et Bérénice* (seven seasons).<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> Guy Boquet, 'Naissance d'une troupe, genèse d'un répertoire', *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 32 (1980): 105-26: 121-22.

<sup>86</sup> As with the two *Bérénice*, I have used *Phèdre et Hippolyte* for Pradon's play and the shorter title for Racine's work.

<sup>87</sup> Forestier, *Jean Racine*, 531, 550-52

<sup>88</sup> Clarke, *Guénégaud II*, 289-90.

<sup>89</sup> This work must be distinguished from the *Coriolan* by an anonymous author created at the Comédie-Française in 1688-89.

<sup>90</sup> Lancaster, *History*, IV, 140-42.

<sup>91</sup> I have followed Sylve Chevalley in assuming this work to be that of Corneille (Chevalley, 'Les deux *Bérénice*': 94).

Three other tragedies revived at this time are of interest for not having previously been given by either Molière's troupe or the Guénégaud company. Pierre Corneille's *Médée*, performed three times in 1677-78, was created at the Marais in 1635,<sup>92</sup> and may have continued in the repertoire of that troupe. Quinault's *Astrate roi de Tyr* is more problematic, since it was created at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1664-65 and there is no record of it having been performed elsewhere in the intervening period.<sup>93</sup> Its revival for just two performances in 1678-79 would, though, suggest it had previously been given at the Marais and was still part of its repertoire. As for Pradon's *Tamerlan ou la mort de Bajazet*, given four times at the Guénégaud in 1677-78 and twice the following season, it had been created at the Hôtel de Bourgogne just two year's earlier in 1675.<sup>94</sup> Its addition at this time suggests, then, the adoption of an aggressive production policy involving the rapid production of plays from a rival company's repertoire, as previously practiced by both Molière and Racine.



French School. Portrait of Marie Desmares La Champmesle (1642-1698)  
 French School. Portrait of Marie Desmares La Champmesle (1642-1698), Actress, as Roxane.  
 Paris, Comedie Francaise. (Photo by: Christopel Fine Art/ UIG via Getty Images)

<sup>92</sup> Alexandre Joannidès, *La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1900: dictionnaire général des pièces et des auteurs* (1901) (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 57.

<sup>93</sup> Philippe Quinault, *Astrate*, ed. by Edmund J. Campion (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1980), vii-viii.

<sup>94</sup> Joannidès, *La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1900*, 81

Things were to become more aggressive still for, during the break between the 1678-79 and 1679-80 seasons, the members of Guénégaud company persuaded Mlle Champmeslé, the leading tragic actress of the age, and her husband to leave the Hôtel de Bourgogne to join them. The inducements were considerable: the Champmeslé couple each received a full share in the company plus a bonus of 1,000 *livres* per annum over and above their shares. In recording this arrangement, La Grange notes neutrally that ‘we accorded them in addition to their shares 1000 [*livres*] per year’, but his later description of this sum as ‘M<sup>lle</sup> Champmeslé[’s] pension’ makes clear the intended beneficiary.<sup>95</sup> This move enabled the Guénégaud to add the masterworks of Racine to its repertoire as well as tragedies by other authors in which Mlle Champmeslé played the lead. Thus, in 1679-80, it gave Racine’s *Andromaque*, *Bérénice*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, *Phèdre*, and *Britannicus*; Thomas Corneille’s *Ariane* and *Camma*; and Pradon’s *Pyrame et Thisbé*.<sup>96</sup> Other revivals this season that may have been influenced by the arrival of Mlle Champmeslé were Pierre Corneille’s *Le Cid* and *Cinna*, since these were both in the repertoire of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and had last been performed by Molière’s troupe in 1659-60 and 1664-65 respectively.<sup>97</sup> More problematic is *Rodogune*, which was also revived in 1679-80 and was also in the repertoire of the Hôtel de Bourgogne,<sup>98</sup> but which had last been given by Molière’s troupe more recently in 1668-69. Similarly, *Héraclius* and *Venceslas* were both revived at the Guénégaud during the first months of 1680-81 (before the creation of the Comédie-Française), having last been given by Molière’s troupe in 1662-63 and 1668-69 respectively, but while the latter was also in the repertoire of the Hôtel de Bourgogne,<sup>99</sup> there is no evidence to that effect for the former. Only one new tragedy was given in 1679-80: *Agamemnon*, attributed to Pader d’Assezan in the account books but later claimed by Boyer.<sup>100</sup> It did moderately well, being given fourteen performances in 1679-80, plus twelve the following season, and was the only one of the new tragedies given at the Guénégaud to become part of the repertoire of the Comédie-Française.

---

<sup>95</sup> La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by Young and Young, I, 218.

<sup>96</sup> I have again followed Sylvie Chevalley in assuming that, following the transfer of Mlle Champmeslé, it was the tragedies previously given at the Hôtel de Bourgogne that were performed at the Guénégaud and at the Comédie-Française, unless otherwise specified (Chevalley, ‘Les deux *Bérénice*’: 94). Of these works, *Camma* alone did not subsequently form part of the repertoire of the Comédie-Française in our period.

<sup>97</sup> Sylvie Chevalley, ‘Les Derniers Jours de l’Hôtel de Bourgogne’, *Revue d’histoire du théâtre*, 17 (1965): 404-407.

<sup>98</sup> *Rodogune* was described by Corneille in 1676 as having been revived recently, which can only have been at the Hôtel de Bourgogne (Corneille, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, III, 1313).

<sup>99</sup> <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1677-10?q=iphigénie#mark1> (accessed 4 August 2018).

<sup>100</sup> Lancaster, *History*, IV, 155-56.

The poaching of Mlle Champmeslé was, undoubtedly, one of the defining moments in French theatre history. The Guénégaud actors were able subsequently to combine their own Molière inheritance with the tragic repertoire from the Hôtel de Bourgogne and thereby establish the basis of what would become the French national canon. The Hôtel de Bourgogne was badly hit and, only sixteen months later, was closed down and its actors transferred to the Guénégaud to form the Comédie-Française. This union might have taken place earlier were it not for the animosity that existed between La Grange and La Thorillière – one of those actors who had left Molière's troupe after its leader's death.<sup>101</sup> An article published in *Le Mercure galant* well after the event, in September 1681, emphasises the superiority of the Guénégaud in this merger, saying that it had 'raised up' the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe.<sup>102</sup> However, the journal, then under the direction of De Visé and Thomas Corneille, was notoriously partial, and there is evidence that De Visé at least received payments for the publicity he supplied.

A document drawn up to calculate what was owed by the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe to La Thorillière's widow provides precious information as to what that company performed between 28 July and 18 August 1680. It continued to give *Le Cid*, *Mithridate*, *Cinna*, *Andromaque*, and *Ariane*, which were, therefore, in the repertoires of both troupes. More surprisingly, it was also performing Molière's *Cocu imaginaire* and *Les Fâcheux*.<sup>103</sup> Mlle Champmeslé's roles had been taken over by Mlle Bellonde, who joined the company specifically for that purpose, following her successful reception at a private performance of *Ariane*. The *Mercure galant* account of her appearance in *Polyeucte* is, though, careful to underline what the Hôtel de Bourgogne had lost and the Guénégaud gained.<sup>104</sup>

The Comédie-Française was founded part way through the 1680-81 season, on 25 August 1680, with performances continuing uninterrupted. While it is possible to analyse the two halves of this season separately (as I have done in my previous studies), I here consider the 1680-81 season as a whole and include it in the Comédie-Française section so as to facilitate comparison across phases. It is at this point, then, that we can consider the relative success of those tragedies given at the Guénégaud.

---

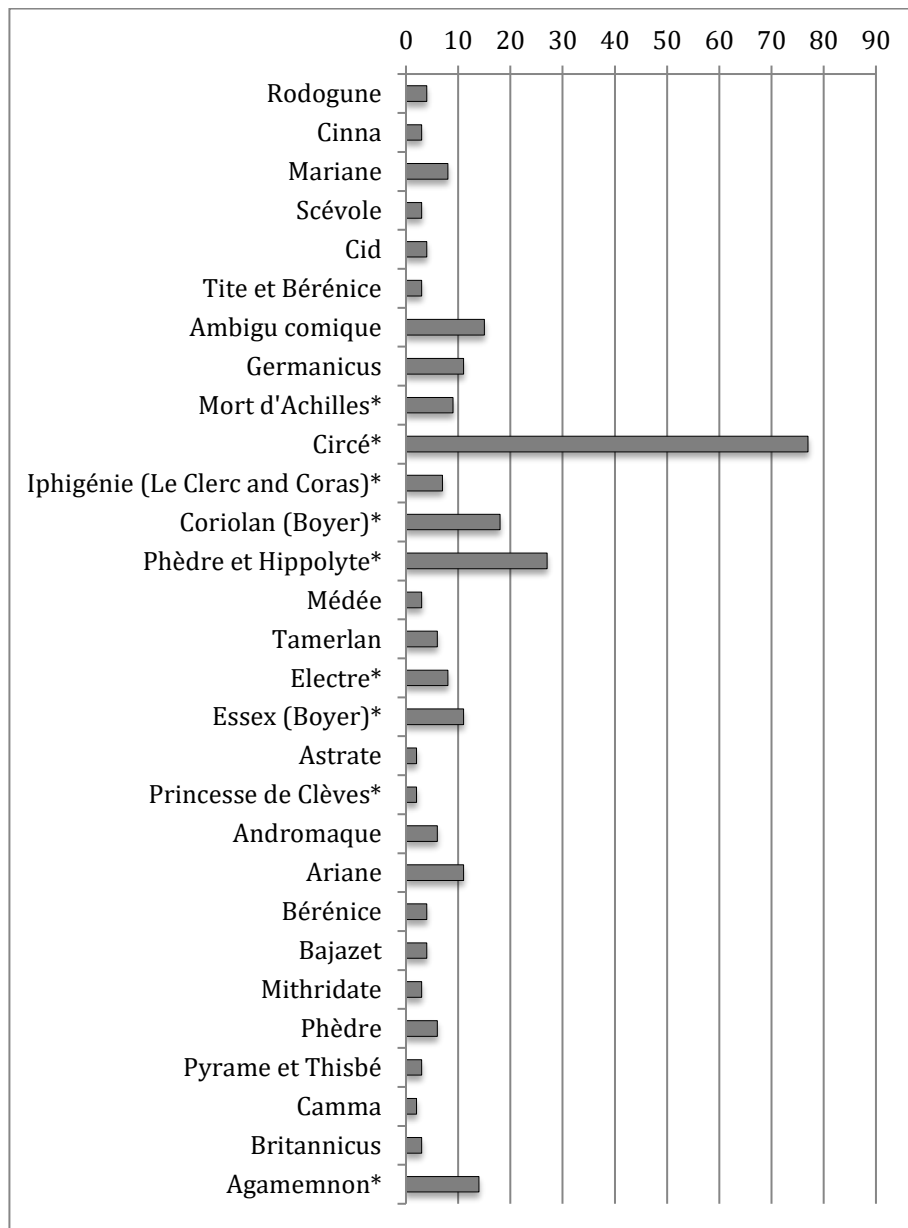
<sup>101</sup> La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by Young and Young, I, 237.

<sup>102</sup> <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1681-09?q=oreste#mark1> (accessed 6 August 1681). On the partiality of the *Mercure galant*, see Clarke, *Guénégaud III*, 48-57.

<sup>103</sup> Chevalley, 'Les Derniers Jours de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne'.

<sup>104</sup> *Mercure galant* (June 1679) <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1679-06?q=belonde#mark1> (accessed 13 August 2018). This document enables us to add *Polyeucte* to the list of plays given at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

**Figure 4: Total number of performances of individual tragedies given by the Guénégaud company, 1673-74 to 1679-80**



Again a spectacular tragedy, in this case *Circé*, was by far the most successful. The new tragedies, *Phèdre et Hippolyte*, *Coriolan* and, to a lesser extent, *Agamemnon*, also did well, but the majority were undistinguished. As for the revivals, most were introduced too late to feature in any significant way and would only come into their own at the Comédie-Française. We should, though, note the continued popularity of *L'Ambigu comique*.

## Comédie-Française

The proportion of tragedy in the repertoire increased exponentially during the Comédie-Française years, in terms both of the number of plays and performances. One contributing factor was an increase in the production of new tragedies, with varying degrees of success. In 1680-81, these were: La Tuilerie's *Soliman* (twelve performances plus four the following season then dropped), Fontenelle's *Aspar* (three performances then dropped), and La Chappelle's *Zaïde* (fifteen performances then dropped). This last disappearance is surprising, given that fifteen performances was a respectable figure; La Chappelle did, though, provide new tragedies for the troupe in subsequent seasons.

In 1681-82, the troupe created *Oreste* by Le Clerc and Boyer (three performances then dropped), La Tuillerie's *Hercule* (sixteen performances then given in repertory up to 1687-88), La Chappelle's *Cléopâtre* (twenty-two performances then given in repertory up to 1688-89),<sup>105</sup> Pradon's *Tarquin* (four performances then dropped), and Genest's *Zélonide* (seventeen performances then given in repertory apart from 1686-87). This was the greatest number of new tragedies ever to be given in a single season. The rate dropped off slightly in 1682-83, when the following were given: Boyer's *Artaxerce* (five performances then dropped), La Chappelle's *Téléphonte* (eleven performances plus one the following season), Campistron's *Virginie* (ten performances then one in each of the following two seasons), and La Tuillerie's *Nitocris* (five performances then dropped).

The number fell again to three in 1683-84: Boursault's *Marie Stuart* (seven performances plus three the following season), Genest's *Pénélope* (eight performances then given in repertory apart from 1686-87), and Campistron's *Arminius* (fourteen performances then given in repertory apart from 1687-88). This rate continued as the norm in the next two seasons. Thus, three new tragedies were given in 1684-85: Louvart's *Mort d'Alexandre* (four performances then dropped), La Chappelle's *Ajax* (sixteen performances then dropped), and Campistron's *Andronic* (twenty-one performances then given in repertory). In 1685-86, the troupe created: *Aristobule* by an anonymous author (three performances then dropped), Campistron's *Alcibiade* (twenty-nine performances then given in repertory), and *Antigone*, again attributed to Pader d'Assezan but claimed by Boyer (three performances plus six the following season).

---

<sup>105</sup> Since 1688-89 is the end of the period under examination, subsequent seasons have not been trawled for information. Where it is stated that plays were given in repertory, this means in this context 'up to 1688-89'.

In 1686-87, the number of new tragedies dropped to two: Campistron's *Phraate* (two performances plus one the following season) and *Géta* by Péchantré (sixteen performances plus fourteen the following season and five in 1688-89). It remained at this level in 1687-88: Dupy's *Varron* (seven performances then dropped) and Pradon's *Régulus* (twenty-eight performances plus ten the following season). Then, in the final season of our period, the number returned to three: *Annibal* by Riuperous (six performances), an anonymous *Coriolan* (three performances) and *Laodamie* by Catherine Bernard, the only female author of a tragedy in the thirty years we are considering (seventeen performances).

We see, then, that although the company tried hard to introduce new tragedies, the results were less than brilliant, with only ten plays achieving fifteen or more performances and few going on to form part of the repertoire. There was, though, as previously noted, an overall rise in the number of tragedies given, as the actors returned to their stock repertoire, reviving old favourites performed by Molière's troupe and the Guénégaud company in the past, a number of which had also been given at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and the majority of which were performed with regularity: *Héraclius*, *Rodogune*, *Cinna*, *Mariane*, *Venceslas*, *Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Nicomède*, *Sertorius*, *Andromaque*, *Ariane*, *Bérénice*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, *Phèdre*, *Polyeucte* (given in nine seasons), *Pompée*, *Pyrame et Thisbé*, *Britannicus* (eight seasons), *Alexandre* (seven seasons), *Scévole*, *Agamemnon* (six seasons), *Attila* (four seasons), *La Thébaïde*, *Astrate* (three seasons). Other tragedies previously performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne (but not by Molière or at the Guénégaud) similarly entered the repertoire: Racine's *Iphigénie*, Pierre Corneille's *Oedipe* (given in nine seasons), Pierre Corneille's *Othon* (seven seasons), Thomas Corneille's *Comte d'Essex* and *Stilicon* (four seasons), Quinault's *Bellérophon* (three seasons). While Pierre Corneille's *Agésilas* was given a single performance in 1683-84 and then dropped.

1681-82 also saw the introduction of a new strand in the company's production policy whereby it embarked on a series of revivals of spectacular works. The first of these was *Endimion*, given eight performances in 1681-82, plus three in 1685-86. Spectacular plays did not normally enter the repertoire due to their demanding technical requirements. It is, therefore, surprising to see *Endimion* being performed as a stock play at this time, perhaps suggesting its spectacular content had been reduced.<sup>106</sup> However, after this testing of the waters, the strategy was taken to a new level in 1682-83 with the revival of Pierre Corneille's machine tragedy,

---

<sup>106</sup> For example, when first revived, the sequence of performances was as follows: 22 July, *Endimion*; 23 July, *Fâcheux* (by Molière) and *Crispin bel esprit* (by La Tuillerie); 24 and 25 July, *Endimion*; 26 July, *Mère coquette* (by Quinault); 27 July, *Endimion* (Henry Carrington Lancaster, *The Comédie-Française 1680-1701: Plays, Actors, Spectators, Finances* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press and Oxford University Press, 1941), 30).



*Andromède* – a play that had been created by the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1650, given by Molière's troupe in Lyon in 1653, and finally revived at the Marais two years later.<sup>107</sup>

More than *Endimion*, the revival of *Andromède* at the Comédie-Française is evidence of the company's commitment to spectacle. As we have seen, Molière's troupe and the Guénégaud company had enjoyed considerable success with *Psyché* and *Circé*, causing Lully to respond by having restrictions imposed on stage music. As a result, Thomas Corneille and De Visé's subsequent efforts had all been in the comic vein and enjoyed diminishing degrees of success,<sup>108</sup> culminating in the withdrawal after two performances of *La Pierre philosophale* in 1681.<sup>109</sup> *Andromède* represents, therefore, a return to the back catalogue as a source of spectacle, not so much as a money-saving exercise (the production cost as much if not more than for a comparable new work),<sup>110</sup> but in a search for 'safe bets' – works whose popularity might as far as possible be guaranteed by past success. Where *Andromède* was concerned, the strategy paid off and it was given forty-five times in 1682-83, before disappearing once more. *Andromède* was followed in 1683-84 by Pierre Corneille's other great machine tragedy, *La Toison d'or* (created at the Marais in 1661), embellished with a new prologue by La Chappelle and given thirty-four times. Then it was the turn of *Psyché*, performed twenty-three times in 1684-85. Finally, in 1685-86, the company turned to De Visé, but his *Amours de Vénus et d'Adonis*, created at the Marais in 1670, was only able to hold its place for six performances, at which point the troupe appears to have temporarily abandoned machine tragedy.<sup>111</sup>

How to explain this falling off in the popularity of machine tragedy? According to La Fontaine, in his 'Epistle to M. de Niert on opera', this was primarily due to a change in public taste:

First the surprising spectacle of the machines  
Dazzled the bourgeois who called it a miracle;  
But the second time he did not rush to seem them;

---

<sup>107</sup> Corneille, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, II, 1396-97

<sup>108</sup> In his obituary of Thomas, De Visé claimed to have collaborated with him on a number of spectacular works, but only those that had been successful: *Mercure galant* (January 1710) [http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1710-01#MG-1710-01\\_270](http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1710-01#MG-1710-01_270) (accessed 13 August 2018).

<sup>109</sup> Clarke, *Guénégaud III*, 277-383. It is no doubt significant that *La Pierre philosophale* flopped in February 1681 and *Endimion* was revived in July.

<sup>110</sup> According to La Grange, the machines for *Andromède* cost 12,921 *livres*, whereas the expenses for the preparation of *Circé* had been 10,842 *livres* (La Grange, *Registre*, ed. by Young and Young, I, 171, 300).

<sup>111</sup> De Visé's *comédie-héroïque*, *Le Mariage de Bacchus et d'Ariane*, created at the Marais in 1672, and given five performances in 1685-86 might also be included here. As we have seen, the Comédie-Française would return to machine tragedy again in 1705, with its revival of *Circé* with a new prologue and *intermèdes* by Dancourt.

He preferred *Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Héraclius*.<sup>112</sup>

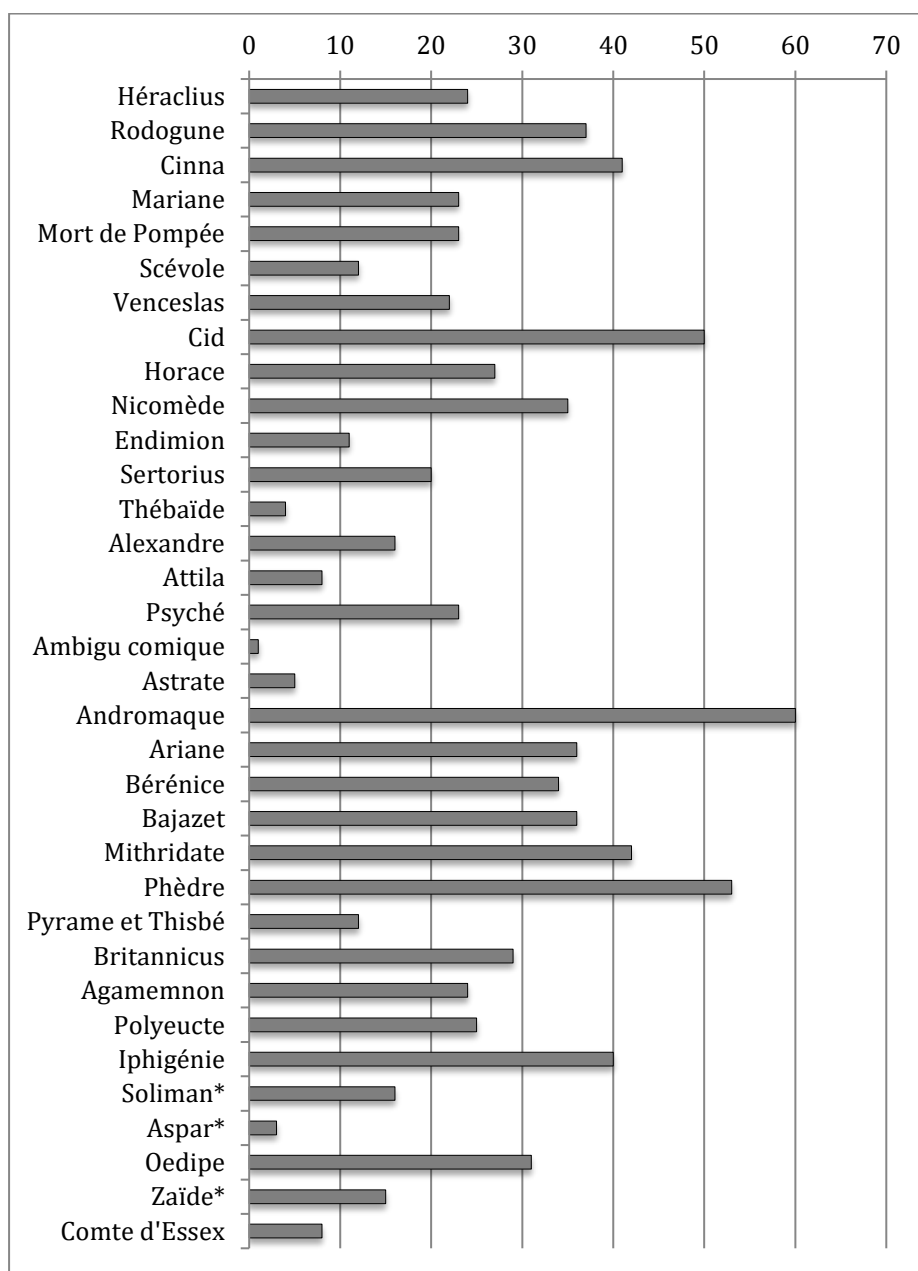
These lines were, however, written shortly after the comparative failure of Lully's opera *Isis* in 1677 and do not account either for the efforts of the Comédie-Française to relaunch machine tragedy, or its steady decline in popularity from 1682-83 onwards.

The chart below allows us to compare the total number of performances accorded to those tragedies performed at the Comédie-Française.

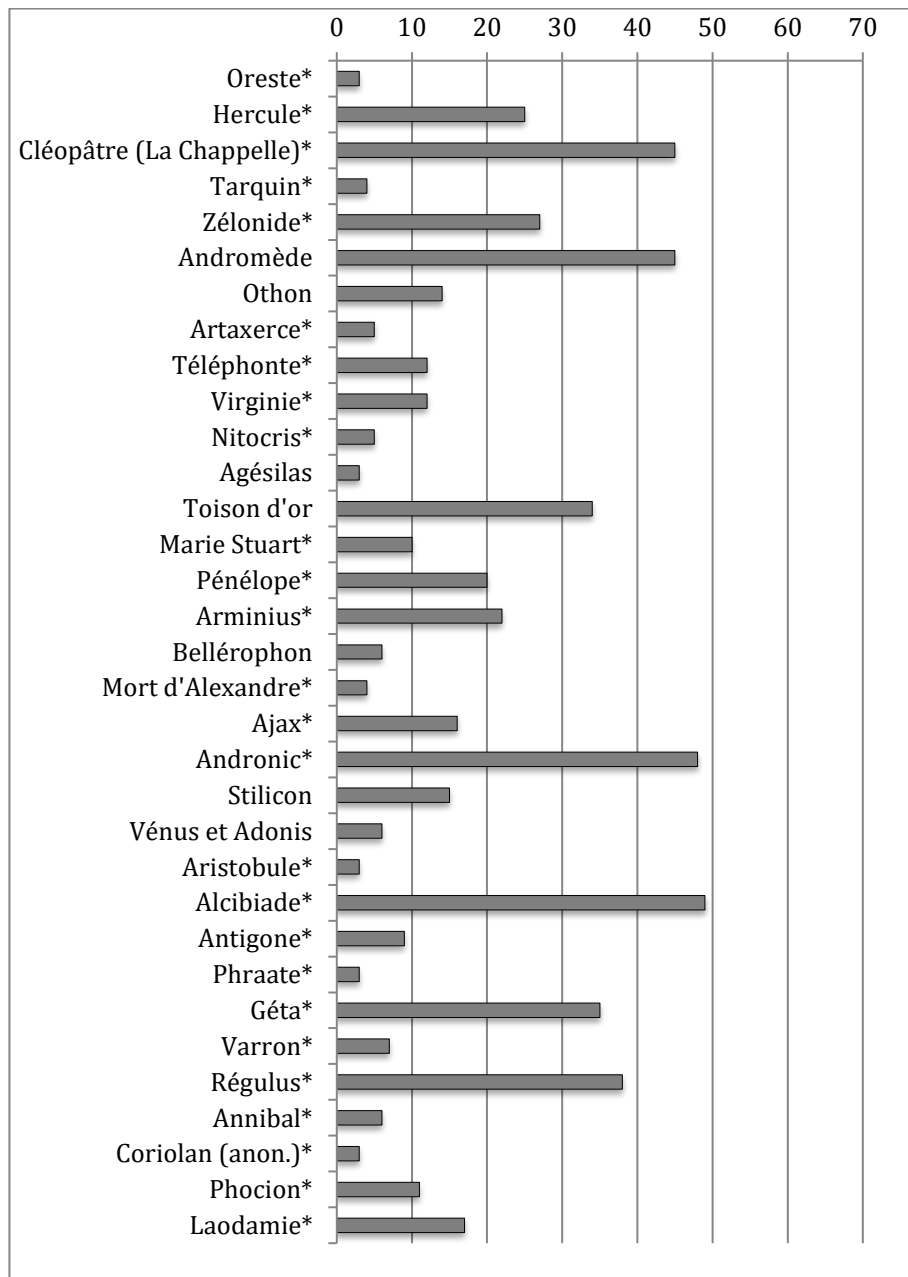
---

<sup>112</sup> Jean de La Fontaine, *Oeuvres diverses*, ed. by Jean Marmier (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 483.

**Figure 5a: Number of performances of individual tragedies given by the Hôtel Guénégaud company and at the Comédie-Française, 1680-81 to 1688-89 (part 1)**



**Figure 5b: Number of performances of individual tragedies given by the Hôtel Guénégaud company and at the Comédie-Française, 1680-81 to 1688-89 (part 2)**

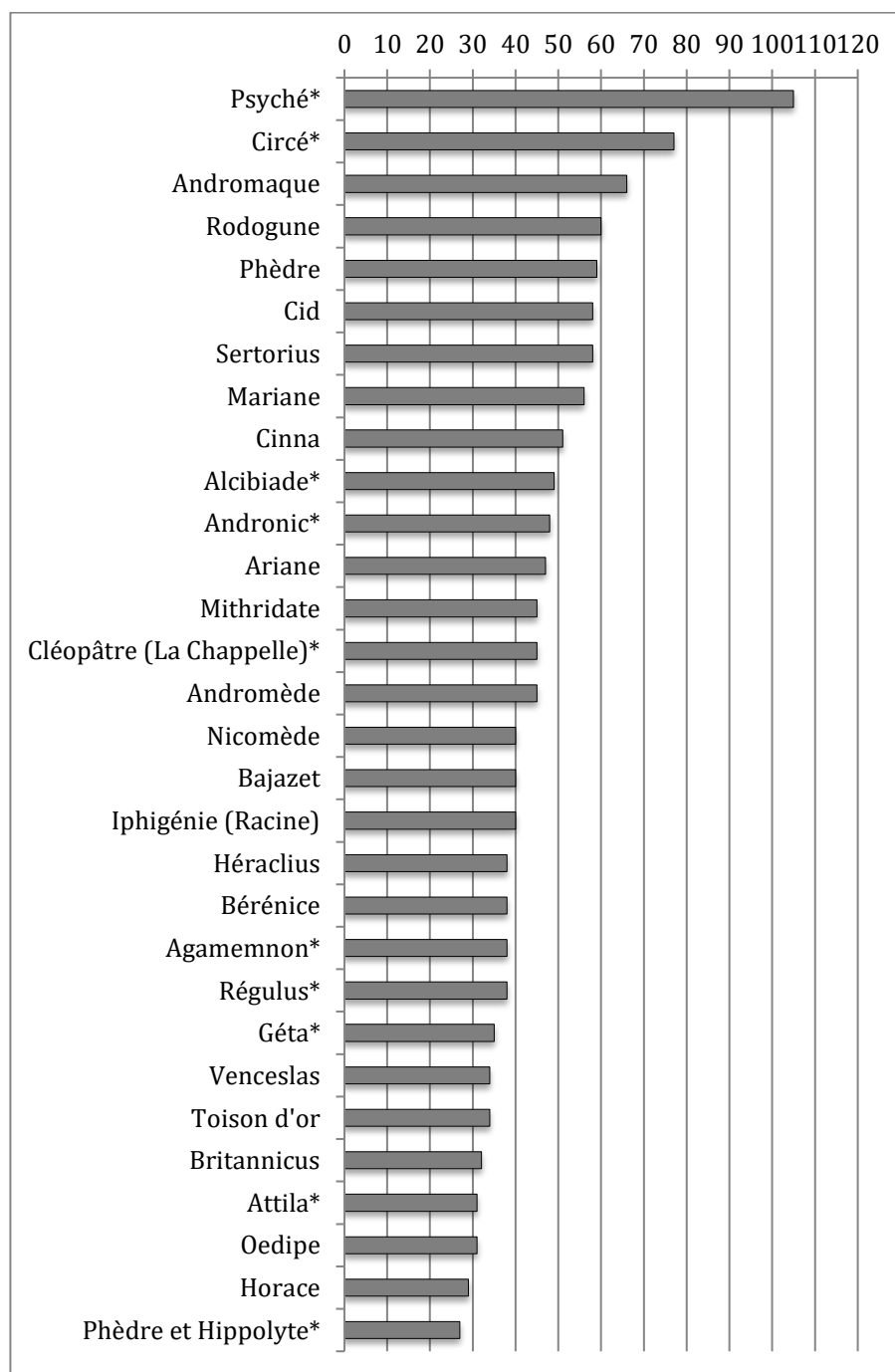


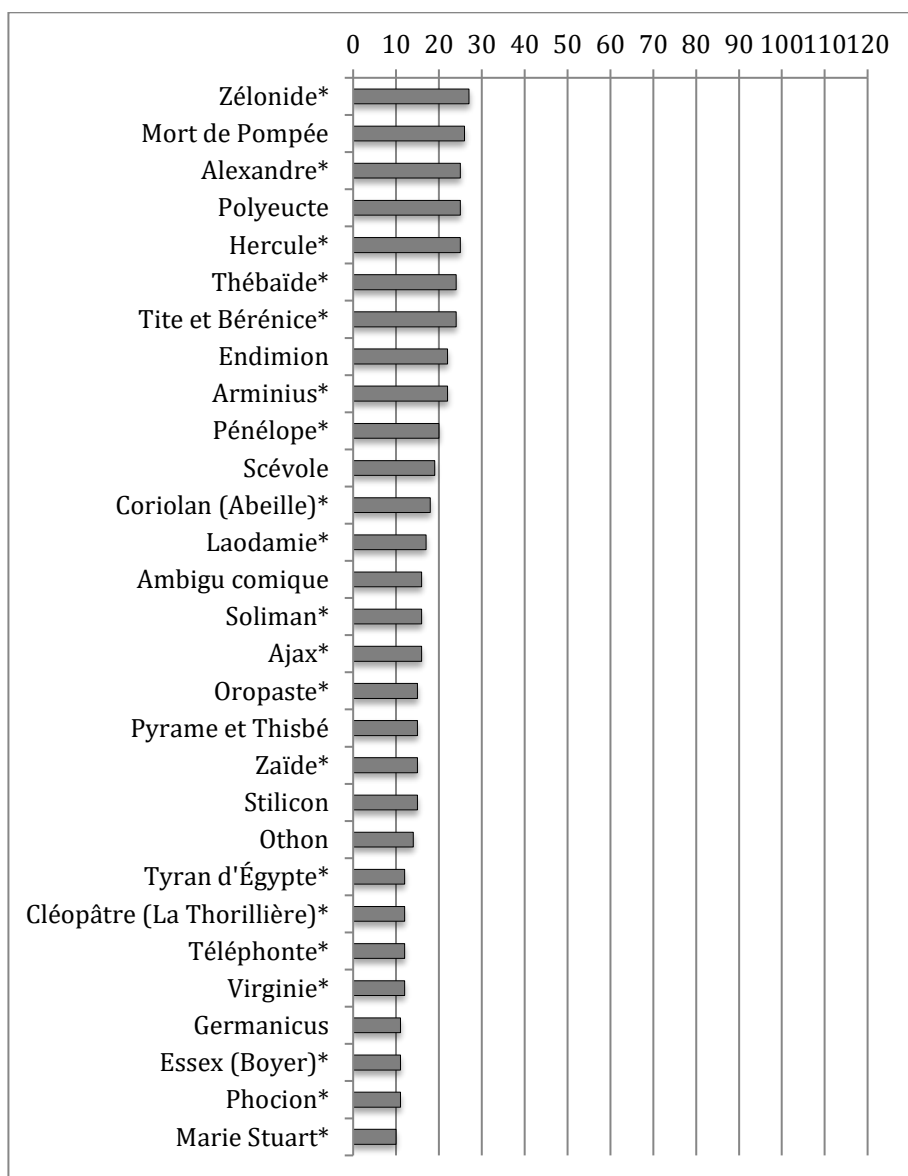
This, then, is the period when what we now consider the great classics of the French national canon came to dominate, with *Le Cid*, *Andromaque* and *Phèdre* being given between fifty and sixty performances; *Cinna*, *Mithridate*, *Iphigénie*, and *Andromaque* between forty and fifty; and *Rodogune*, *Nicomède*, *Ariane*, *Bérénice*, *Bajazet*, and *Oedipe* between thirty and forty. Perhaps more surprising, though, is the comparative success of new works that have since been forgotten: La Chappelle's *Cléopâtre*, Campistron's *Andronic* and *Alcibiade*, Péchantré's *Géta*,

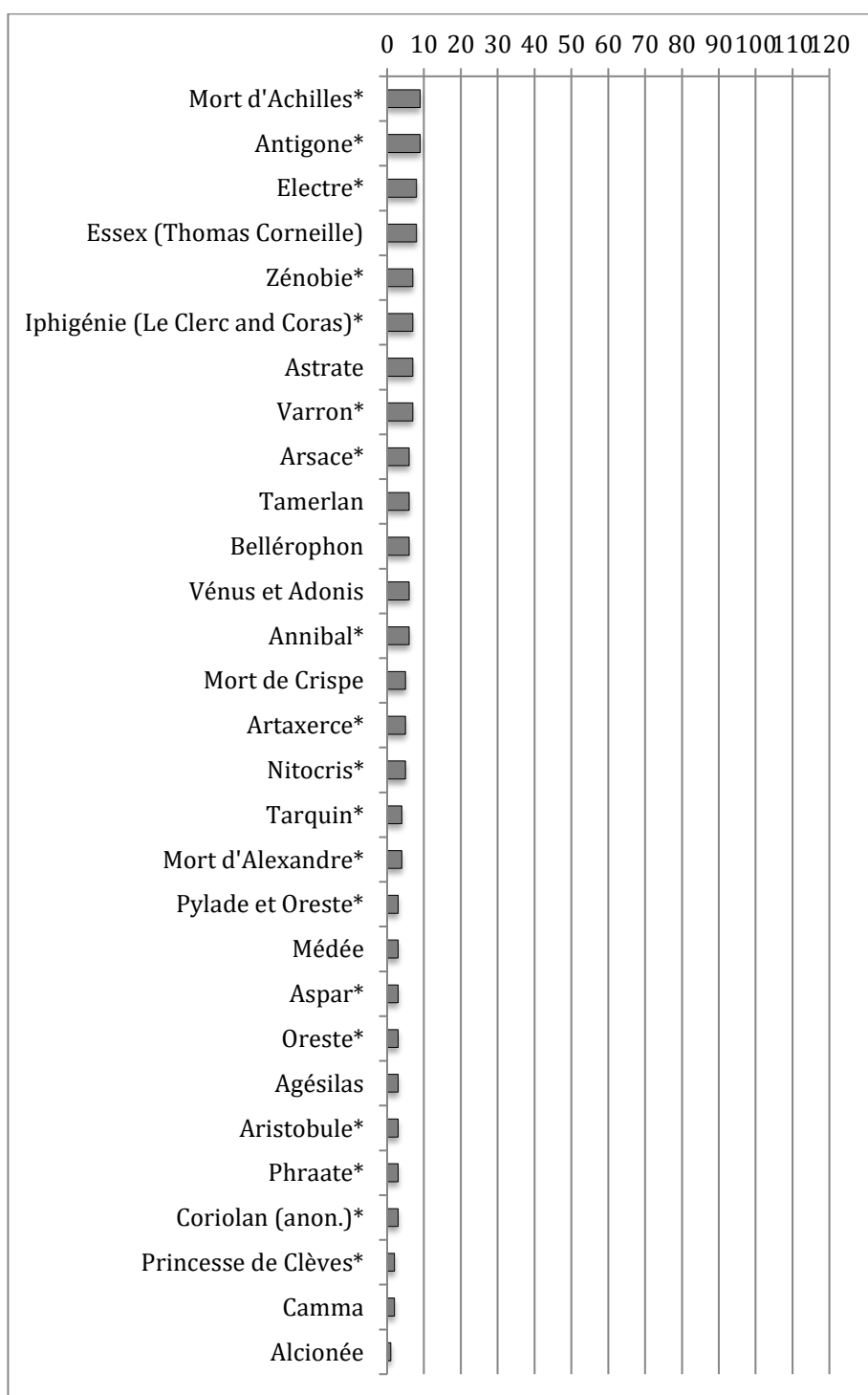
and Pradon's *Régulus*. And we should also note the popularity of the company's first two machine tragedy revivals: *Andromède* and *La Toison d'or*.

Bringing all this information together, allows us to establish a league table showing the relative popularity of all those tragedies performed by our three companies across these thirty years.

**Figure 6a: League table (top third)**



**Figure 6b: League table (middle third)**

**Figure 6c: League table (bottom third)**

Immediately apparent is the extent to which the spectacular works *Psyché* and *Circé* outstripped other tragic creations. We should also note the good showing of the revivals of *Andromède* and *La Toison d'or*. This is particularly remarkable in that, with the exception of *Psyché*, each of these enjoyed only one run (*Psyché*, it will be recalled, was initially performed across two seasons and then given a further revival). Of the other high performing plays, those by Racine

had been created comparatively recently at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, as had Thomas Corneille's *Ariane*, but were well on their way to becoming 'classics'. It may also have been significant that Mlle Champmeslé was still starring.<sup>113</sup> Some of these successful tragedies were very old (*Mariane* had been created in 1636 and *Venceslas* in 1647), and although their high ranking might partially be explained by their having been performed across a long period, that they remained in the repertoires of these companies for so long itself attests to their continued popularity.

The last years of the seventeenth century are frequently seen as a period of decline, following the death of Molière and the retirements of Pierre Corneille and Racine,<sup>114</sup> with no playwrights of merit emerging to replace them.<sup>115</sup> It is, though, impossible to test this statistically, at least where tragedy is concerned, given the absence of information regarding audiences and takings at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Who is to say, for example, that the initial runs of *Alcibiade* or *Andronic* were not more successful than those of *Andromaque* or *Phèdre*? Setting aside contemporary commentaries, which may well be biased, all we can say with certainty is that the former plays did not go on to become part of the canon whereas the latter did. It is, though, apparent as we scan our league table that many tragedies created during this period performed poorly, even by the standards of the day, with thirty-nine per cent being accorded fewer than ten performances. Moreover, whereas during the Molière phase, four tragedies were performed in only one season (out of eleven), rising to five (out of nine) at the Guénégaud; at the Comédie-Française, this rose again to thirteen (out of twenty-nine).<sup>116</sup> It is indisputable, therefore, that a high number of those tragedies selected for performance were failing to attract and retain audiences.<sup>117</sup> And when we consider the above figures as percentages (thirty-six per cent, fifty-six per cent and forty-eight per cent respectively), we see that the Guénégaud, in fact, performed worst – perhaps understandably given that it was confronting the might of Racine at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Little wonder, then, that it should have sought to triumph by other means via the suborning of Mlle Champmeslé.

---

<sup>113</sup> Assuming these roles reverted to Mlle Champmeslé on the merger, with Mlle Bellonde as second choice if she were elsewhere or indisposed (Alain Couprie, *La Champmeslé* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 230).

<sup>114</sup> Pierre Corneille's last theatrical work was *Suréna* in 1674, while Racine abandoned the professional stage in 1677, following the production of *Phèdre*.

<sup>115</sup> Victor Fournel, 'Contemporains et successeurs de Racine: les poètes tragiques décriés, Le Clerc, l'abbé Boyer, Pradon, Campistron', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 27 (1920): 233-58.

<sup>116</sup> Catherine Bernard's *Laodamie* has been omitted because it was subsequently revived at the Comédie-Française after 1689.

<sup>117</sup> As Sara Harvey notes, 'les créations de tragédies se maintiennent plus difficilement sur le long terme' (Harvey, 'La Genèse stratifiée du répertoire': 96).



### Tragedies performed at court or ‘en visite’?

Thus far, I have described solely activity in the capital. However, these three companies also gave private performances: for the King or for wealthy and usually aristocratic patrons. Many are recorded by La Grange, especially when they involved absence from Paris or the receipt of income. Others are not, and can only be identified from other sources. Moreover, when La Grange does mention a court trip, he does not always state what plays were given. The accuracy of the recording of such trips increased considerably with the advent of the Comédie-Française. Even so, the figures I will give are necessarily approximate and can only serve to indicate general trends.

Of the 192 private performances I have identified Molière as having given at court and for other patrons, where plays are named only fifteen (eight per cent) are tragedies: *Sertorius* three times, *La Thébaïde* three times, *Attila* twice, La Thorillière’s *Cléopâtre* once, *Psyché* six times. This is scarcely surprising given that he and his company were celebrated primarily for comedy. Royal favour appears to have been personal to Molière and, following his death, the Guénégaud company appeared far less frequently at court, despite petitioning to be allowed to do so. Indeed, only eight private performances are recorded, of which three (thirty-eight per cent) were of tragedies: *La Mort d’Achille* at Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1674, and, in 1679, following the transfer of Mlle Champmeslé, Racine’s *Phèdre* for the Spanish Ambassador in and *Mithridate* or Colbert.<sup>118</sup>

This was not because the King had given up theatre, for the Hôtel de Bourgogne performed at court much more frequently, with Pierre Corneille being a particular favourite. Thus, it is noted in the *Nouveau Mercure galant* (January-March 1677) à propos of *Isis* that ‘The beauties of this opera did not cause the King and all the court to forget the inimitable tragedies of M. de Corneille the elder, which were performed at Versailles last autumn.’<sup>119</sup> In the verses Corneille addressed to the King on that occasion, he boasts of Louis having ‘rescussitated’ him in the face of challenges from younger rivals, and mentions recent performances of *Cinna*, *Pompée*, *Horace*, *Sertorius*, *Oedipe*, and *Rodogune*.<sup>120</sup> And in October 1677, the *Mercure galant* published a list of twenty-five plays performed at Fontainebleau by the Hôtel de Bourgogne that included *Iphigénie*, *Mariane*, *Pompée*, *Mithridate*, *Horace*,

<sup>118</sup> Clarke, *Guénégaud I*, 200-07.

<sup>119</sup> <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1677-03?q=rodogune#mark1> (accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>120</sup> Corneille, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, III, 1313.

*Bajazet, Phèdre, Oedipe, Venceslas, Cinna, and Nicomède*.<sup>121</sup> Pierre Corneille was also resurgent in town; in March 1678, *Le Mercure galant* noted that his plays continued to be revived and that *Polyeucte* had recently been performed ‘with an extraordinary crowd and acclamations’.<sup>122</sup> And on 19 September 1679, the new Queen of Spain attended a performance of *Sertorius* on the eve of her departure for her new country: ‘Thus it was with a play by the great Corneille that she enjoyed for the last time this entertainment in France’.<sup>123</sup>

The Comédie-Française appeared at court with far greater regularity than the Guénégaud company, not least because its increased size meant it was able to split and simultaneously entertain both King and Parisian public. I have identified 406 performances between 1680 and 1689, 275 (sixty-eight per cent) of which were of tragedies. Interestingly, an article in *Le Mercure galant* of September 1681 suggests that following the fusion the two component companies were still seen as separate entities when it came to performances at court:

The actors who occupied the Hôtel de Bourgogne before the union of the two troupes have been chosen to entertain the King first. While they were at Fontainebleau, they performed many plays by M. de Corneille the elder and M. Racine, with a new tragedy entitled *Oreste*.<sup>124</sup>

The merger had, however, taken place over a year before and these were not the first works to be given at court. Moreover, tragic and comic works were never performed in isolation, as is clear from an article describing performances organized by the King’s brother at Saint-Cloud: ‘*Zaïde Princesse de Grenade* and *Les Précieuses ridicules* were performed [...]. There were balls or plays every day. Apart from the two I have just mentioned, *Iphigénie* by M. Racine [...], was performed with *La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas* by the late Molière; *Dom Bertrand de Cigarral* by M. de Corneille the younger; and *Les Usuriers* by the Italians.’<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1677-10?q=iphigénie#mark1> (accessed 4 August 2018).

<sup>122</sup> <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1678-03?q=corneille#mark1> (accessed 4 August 2018). This must have been at the Hôtel de Bourgogne because *Polyeucte* was not added to the Guénégaud repertoire until June 1681.

<sup>123</sup> *Mercure galant* (September 1679) <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1679-09?q=sertorius#mark1> (accessed 6 August 2018). Marie-Louise d’Orléans had married Charles II of Spain by proxy on 30 August.

<sup>124</sup> <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1681-09?q=oreste#mark1> (accessed 6 August 1681). *Oreste* by Le Clerc and Boyer was created at the Comédie-Française on 10 October 1681.

<sup>125</sup> *Mercure galant* (April 1681) <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1681-04?q=sigarral#mark1> (accessed 6 August 2018).

And the popularity of older tragedies with the court is further attested to by an article reporting on another series of entertainments at Saint-Cloud that included *Nicomède*, *Oedipe*, *Polyeucte*, *Venceslas*, *Britannicus*, and *Phèdre*.<sup>126</sup>

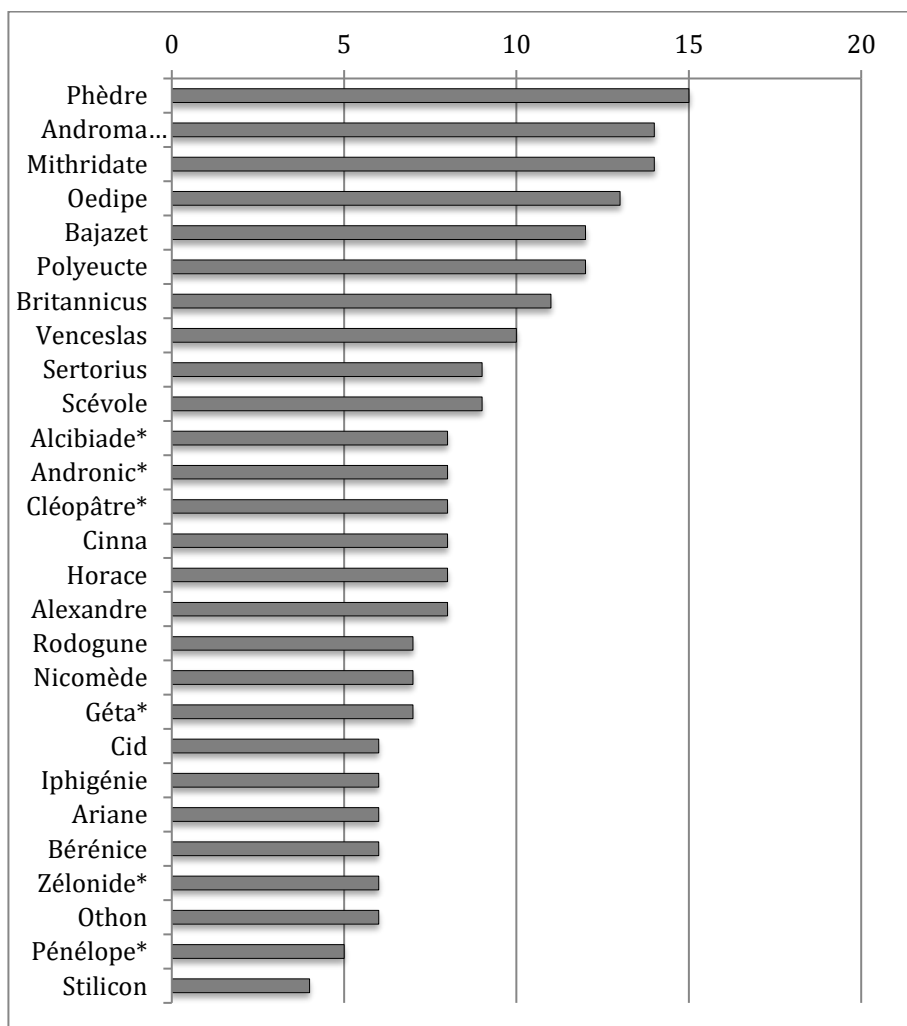
Of the sixty-six tragedies given by the Comédie-Française in this period, only sixteen were not given at court. Four of these were spectacular works, whose technical requirements would not have allowed them to be transported (*Endimion*, *Psyché*, *Andromède*, *La Toison d'or*, *L'Amour de Vénus et d'Adonis*). Of the remainder, seven were new plays (*Aspar*, *Tarquin*, *Nitocris*, *Marie Stuart*, *Mort d'Alexandre*, *Annibal*, *Coriolan*), none of which had been given more than seven times in town. However, *Oreste*, *Artaxerce*, *Aristobule*, *Antigone*, and *Phraate* all fared just as badly in town if not worse, and that did not prevent them from being seen at court. The remaining three plays that were not performed at court were *L'Ambigu comique*, *Astrate* and *Agésilas*; and while the neglect of the former two is understandable, it is an indication of the unpopularity of Pierre Corneille's tragedy to find it on this list.

The fifty-one tragedies that were performed privately were not, however, treated equally.

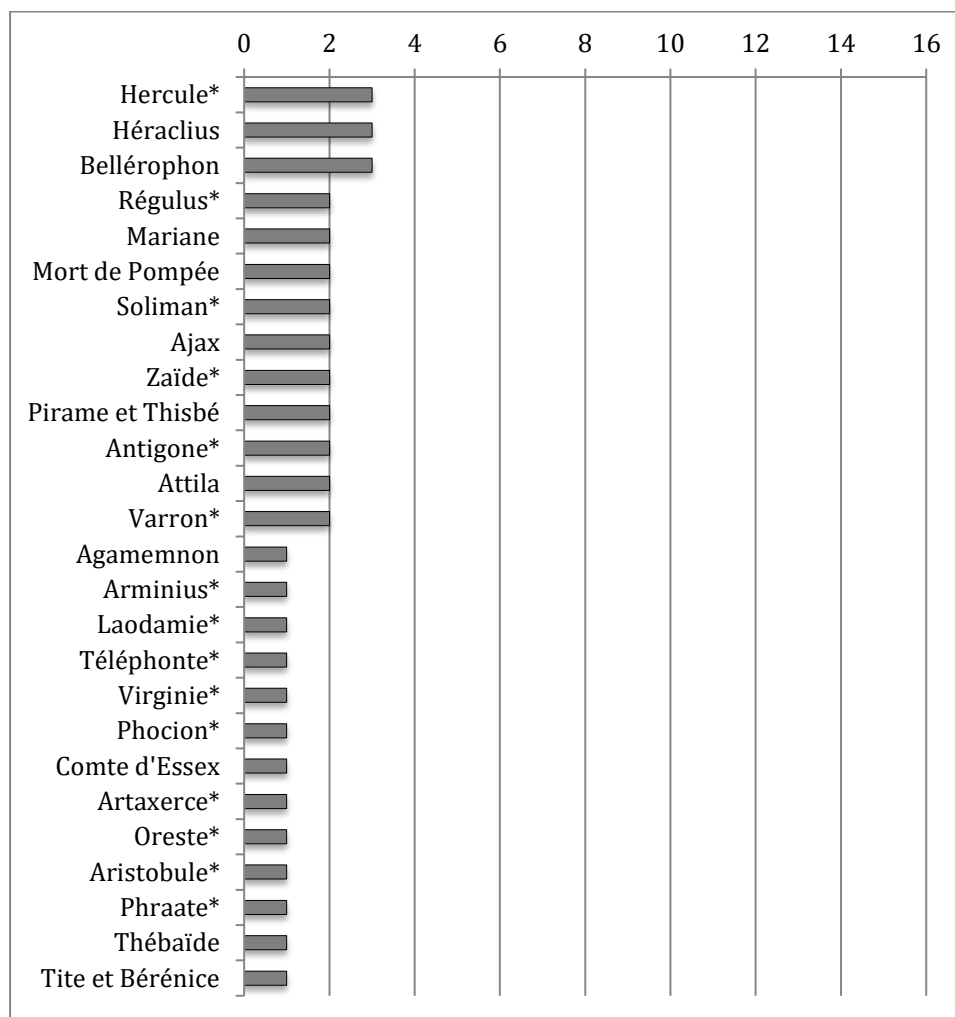
---

<sup>126</sup> *Mercure galant* (February 1682) (<http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/mercure-galant/MG-1682-05?q=venceslas#mark1>) (accessed 6 August 2018).

**Chart 7a: League table of tragedies performed privately,  
1680-81 to 1688-89 (top half)**



**Figure 7b: League table of tragedies performed privately,  
1680-81 to 1688-89 (bottom half)**



Thus, the great ‘classic’ tragedies by Pierre Corneille and Racine were much more in demand for private performances than were the majority of new plays, although *Alcibiade*, *Andronic* and *Cléopâtre* again did remarkably well. The presence of one play on this list must, however, be singled out, for Pierre Corneille’s *Tite et Bérénice* was performed at court in 1682-83 without, to my knowledge, having previously been given at the Comédie-Française. On 9 February 1683, the Comédie-Française gave a performance at Versailles of a work identified in the account book as ‘Bérénice’,<sup>127</sup> which commentators have generally identified as Racine’s work.<sup>128</sup> However, letters preserved in the Comédie-Française archives, not only reveal it to have been Pierre Corneille’s *Tite et Bérénice*, but also attest to the Dauphin’s determination to

<sup>127</sup> Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie-Française, R14, Registre 1682-1683, 291v.

<sup>128</sup> See, for example, William S. Brooks, P. J. Yarrow, *The Dramatic Criticism of Elizabeth Charlotte, duchesse d'Orléans* (Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1996), 101.

see it. On 18 January 1683, Duché, who was responsible for liaison between the company and the Gentlemen of the Bedchamber who organised court entertainments, wrote to La Grange instructing him to replace Corneille's *Tite et Bérénice* at the top of the list of plays to be performed there with *Pyrame et Thisbé*, *Attila*, *Agésilas* and *Sophonisbe*.<sup>129</sup> He wrote later the same day, saying that the reason for this postponement was to allow the troupe time to prepare. The performance was next programmed for 21 January, by order of the Dauphin, but was delayed yet again, finally taking place on 9 February.<sup>130</sup> And it is no doubt this performance that explains the inclusion of 'Bérénice by M. Corneille' in the list of scenic requirements known as the *Mémoire de Mahelot*, where it is specified unhelpfully that the 'stage is a palace'.<sup>131</sup>

## Conclusion

I have long been convinced of the necessity of studying not just those new works given in any one season or by any one company, but also how companies put their programmes together day by day, week by week, season by season. In this regard, the Comédie-Française Registers project is a major advance, but only begins in 1680. The Comédie-Française was, though, very much a product of what had gone before in terms of the repertoires and administrative practices of the four companies (Hôtel de Bourgogne, Marais, Molière, Hôtel Guénégaud) that contributed to it directly or indirectly. All four of these had performed tragedies, to a greater or lesser extent and with a greater or lesser degree of success. A study of the repertoires of the three companies for which we have the most complete records and which succeeded each other chronologically enables us to see how tragedy played a major role in subtly different ways in the activity of each of them: from Molière, with his passion for Pierre Corneille, via the Hôtel Guénégaud and its 'war of the tragedies', to the establishment of the tragic canon at the Comédie-Française. Of course, any such study necessarily comes to a somewhat abrupt conclusion and this is no exception. Not only did plays introduced in the last of the seasons considered here continue on (however briefly) in the repertoire of the Comédie-Française (*Laodamie* for example), but policies were maintained or evolved over time (as with the revival of *Circé* in 1705). It is also important to remember that our views as theatre historians are influenced by the work of those scholars (and practitioners) who have preceded us, and Sara Harvey rightly points to the 'drastic selection' effected in the nineteenth century with regard to

<sup>129</sup> Note that the last two were not performed at court in this period.

<sup>130</sup> Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie-Française, 1AA 1680-1700, 1AA 1683, 3-7. Extracts from these letters were first published by Sylvie Chevalley in Chevalley, 'Les deux *Bérénice*': 94-96.

<sup>131</sup> Pierre Pasquier, *Le Mémoire de Mahelot: mémoire pour la décoration des pièces qui se représentent par les Comédiens du Roi*, (Paris: Champion, 2005), 219, 337.

the national repertoire.<sup>132</sup> I hope, therefore, to have also reminded readers that the diversity of tragic output was greater in this period than is often supposed and to have drawn their attention to some tragic triumphs of the age that have since been largely forgotten.

Jan Clarke  
Durham University

---

<sup>132</sup> Harvey, 'La Genèse stratifiée du répertoire': 97-98.